

Groton Daily Independent

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Tuesday, Dec. 17

Senior Menu: Beef and broccoli stir fry, rice, mixed vegetables, firve cup salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Oatmeal.

School Lunch: Hot dogs, chips.

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.

Basketball Doubleheader - Hosts Sisseton: Boys C at 4 p.m. and Girls C at 5 p.m. in the gym; Girls JV at 4 p.m. and Boys JV at 5 p.m. followed by girls varsity and boys varsity in the Arena.

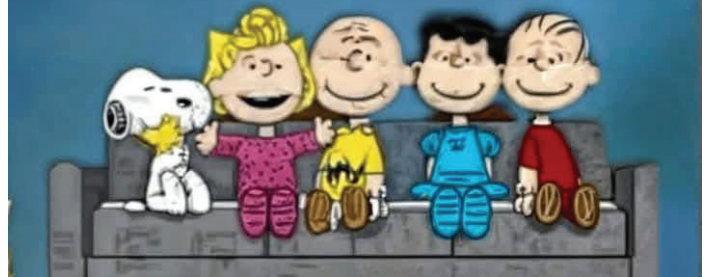
Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center

Groton United Methodist: Bible Study with Pastor Rob, 10 a.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

One day at a time
is all we should be
dealing with. We can't
go back to yesterday,
we can't predict
tomorrow, so let's live
for today and make
it beautiful.



Wednesday, Dec. 18

Senior Menu: Chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, oriental blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Sweet and sour pork, rice.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; DFC Youth supper, 6 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Dec. 19

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, sweet potato, Catalina blend, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, tater tots.

JH GBB at Aberdeen Roncalli

NEC Boys and Girls Wrestling at Groton Area, 4 p.m.

Holiday Light Contest

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1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

Wisconsin School Shooting

At least two people were killed and six injured after a shooter opened fire at a K-12 school in Madison, Wisconsin, yesterday. The suspect also took their own life before encountering police, according to reports.

Officials have not publicly identified the shooter; however, multiple accounts suggest the shooter was a female teenage student at the nondenominational Christian school, Abundant Life. In a press conference yesterday afternoon, local police described the victims as a student and a teacher.

No motive for the attack was offered as of yet, but officials recovered a single handgun and described the condition of those injured as ranging from minor to life-threatening. As of this writing, no information has been revealed about the victims.

Germany's Government Collapses

Germany's government collapsed yesterday after Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a vote of confidence. A caretaker government is now steering Europe's largest economy, with snap elections planned for Feb. 23.

Scholz called the unusual vote last month after firing his finance minister over differences on tax and debt policy, triggering his coalition's collapse. Some analysts suggest the vote played out as intended, spurring early elections Scholz hopes will deliver his center-left Social Democratic Party an outright majority. Still, recent polls suggest the center-right Christian Democratic Union is on track to return to power, with the conservative populist Alternative for Germany polling in second.

The collapse of Germany's government is the latest in a string of political upheavals this year; incumbent parties suffered losses or setbacks in at least a dozen countries. The economy is regularly cited as a leading concern for voters, with inflation up across the globe.

Ozy Media CEO Sentenced

Former talk show host and Ozy Media cofounder Carlos Watson was sentenced to nearly 10 years in prison yesterday for attempting to defraud investors and lenders by lying about his now-defunct media company's finances.

The sentencing comes five months after a federal jury convicted 55-year-old Watson and Ozy Media of conspiracy to commit securities and wire fraud; Watson was also convicted of identity theft. The scheme included forged contracts and false claims about the company's 2018-2021 earnings and audience size. Ozy's chief operating officer also misrepresented himself as a YouTube executive during a 2021 call with Goldman Sachs. The bank was reportedly considering a \$40M investment in Ozy, based primarily on self-reported readership numbers and a purported relationship with YouTube.

Ozy Media was an Emmy-winning digital media platform popular with younger consumers until it shut down in October 2021 after reports emerged questioning its business practices. Watson has denied any wrongdoing.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Wicked" sequel gets official title "Wicked: For Good" with film set for November 2025 release date.

Lionel Messi-inspired animated series tapped for Disney Channel and Disney+.

Jill Jacobson, actress known for roles on "Falcon Crest" and "Star Trek," dies at 70.

Dick Van Arsdale, three-time NBA All-Star, dies at 81.

Documentary in the works by filmmaker Alex Gibney about the murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson.

Jamie Lee Curtis in talks to play lead role in upcoming "Murder, She Wrote" film.

Science & Technology

Google's DeepMind reveals Veo 2, the latest update to its AI-generated video platform; product is meant to compete with OpenAI's Sora.

Generative AI 101, from how it works to why it hallucinates.

James Webb Space Telescope confirms two-decade-old mystery, finds evidence planets bigger than Jupiter formed around stars much earlier in the universe than predicted by theory.

Researchers discover closest known relative to *Psilocybe cubensis*, also known as magic mushrooms; fungi potentially reached North America as much as a million years earlier than believed.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.4%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq +1.2%); Nasdaq notches record ahead of Federal Reserve's interest rate decision tomorrow.

Nvidia closes in correction territory, down roughly 11% from record close last month.

Bitcoin hits new record midday, briefly surpassing \$107K.

TikTok asks Supreme Court to block the US' divest-or-ban law pending an appeal of a lower-court ruling to uphold the law taking effect Jan. 19.

Ken Leech, former co-chief investment officer at Western Asset Management Co., pleads not guilty to federal charges over improperly allocating trades to favored clients.

Honeywell considers spin-off of lucrative aerospace business—a move backed by activist investor Elliott Investment Management, which took a \$5B stake in the conglomerate last month.

Politics & World Affairs

Japanese tech giant SoftBank pledges to invest \$100B into US companies over next four years and create 100,000 jobs; SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son, who met with President-elect Donald Trump yesterday, made a similar pledge in 2016.

Former FBI informant pleads guilty to fabricating claim that President Joe Biden and his son Hunter accepted bribes from a Ukrainian energy company; false claim was used as part of evidence in GOP-led efforts to investigate Biden family.

Canada's Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland resigns following dispute with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau over tax policy and the country's response to Trump's tariff threats.

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Pictured with Santa are Jaycee, 6; and Kylie, 3; with their mom, Kelly Brandlee. Their dad is Clint Brandlee. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Rylie, 15; Willow, 1; Beckett, 6; Ava, 4; Graham, 12; Nolan, 9; and Keller, 1; from the family of Karen Rose. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Kroy, 8; and Kruz, 4; from the family of Tammy Kahli. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa is Harvey, 9 months, son of Neil and Vanessa Ducharme. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Preslee, Wrenley, Hazel and Emersyn, daughters of Heath and Katelyn Giedt. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Bennix, 2; Jacoby, 5; and Braylee, 7; from the Jessica Harry family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Jett, 4 days; Calli, 9; and Nash, 3; children from the Sydney Kurtz family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Matty, 7; Ryah, 2; and Elijah, 4; children from the McKenzie Menzia family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Annie and Harper from the Kris and Alison Harry family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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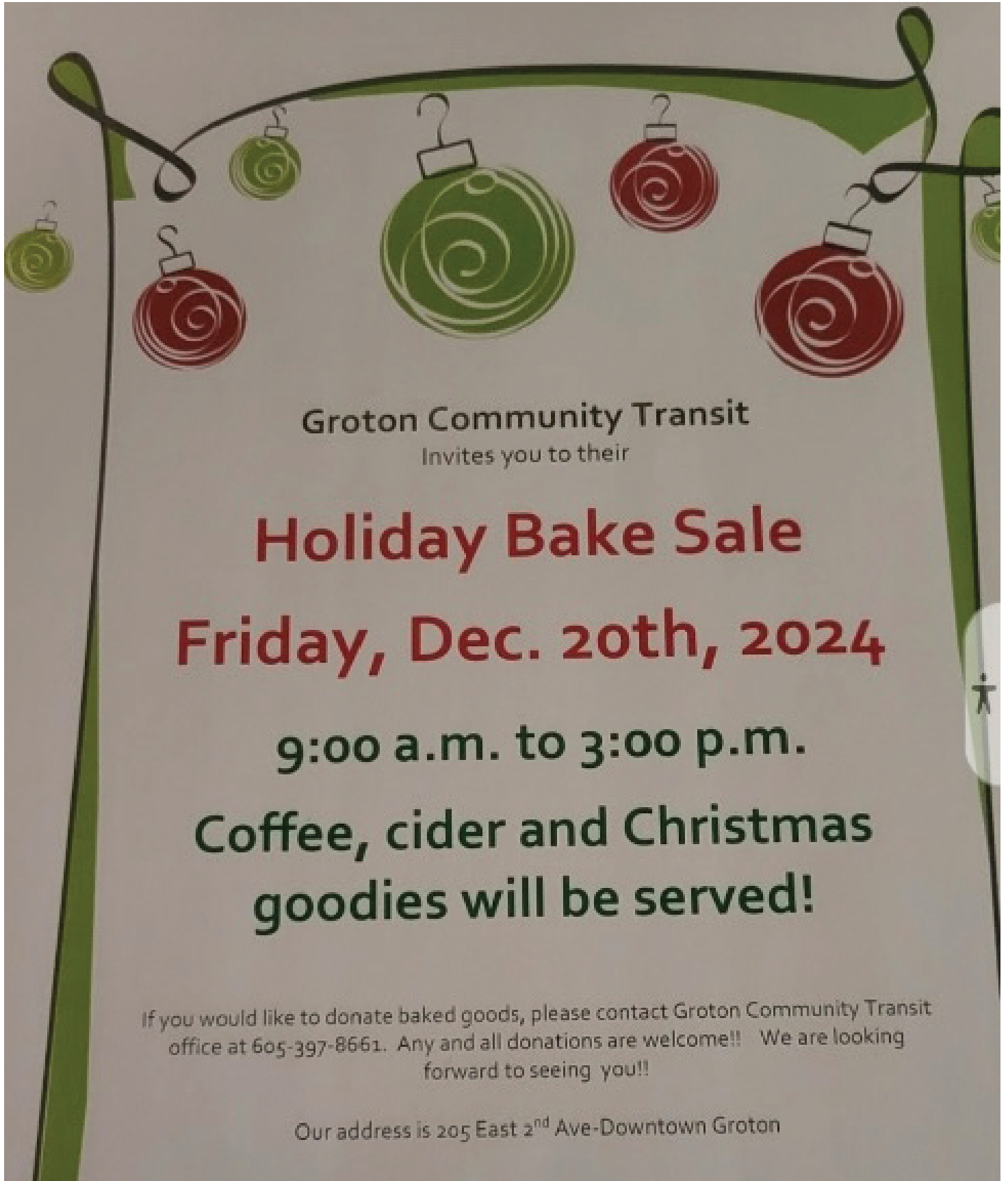
Pictured with Santa is Garth H.J., 7 months, from the Saleen Waldner family. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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Pictured with Santa are Amara, 9; and Alandra, 5; daughters of Michelle Barrow and Wes Graff. Photo taken at Santa Day at Professional Management Services. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Groton Community Transit
Invites you to their

Holiday Bake Sale

Friday, Dec. 20th, 2024

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas
goodies will be served!

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact Groton Community Transit office at 605-397-8661. Any and all donations are welcome!! We are looking forward to seeing you!!

Our address is 205 East 2nd Ave-Downtown Groton

HOLIDAY BAKE SALE

12/20/2024-Friday

Happy Holidays! We hope this finds all of you staying well and healthy! Hoping you can enjoy what this wonderful season brings!

We are looking for donations of baked goods for our upcoming bake sale on Friday, December 20th 2024. If you would like to donate items please contact the dispatch office at 605-397-8661. Baked goods need to be delivered to the transit by 8:00 am the morning of the bake sale. Please feel free to package your items to your liking. We will price items as they are brought in. As always, we would like to thank you for supporting the GCT!! We look forward to hearing from you!

Please don't hesitate to call to arrange pickup of your donation...We would be happy to come and grab from you!!

Sincerely & Thank you Again!!

Groton Community Transit



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Card Shower
Merry Jo Ball will be celebrating her
on December 24, 2024.



Greetings may be sent to
915 Arbor Lane Apt 37
Aberdeen SD 57401

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area
Tigers

GT



Tuesday, Dec. 17

4:00 Girls JV

Sponsored by
Krause Family

5:15 Girls C

Sponsored by
Krause Family

Girls Varsity around

6:30 p.m. followed by

Boys Varsity

\$5 ticket or

GDI Subscription

required to watch the games.

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You have to start some time! Why not **now!**

5 months to get your through the winter!

Student: \$175.75, Single: \$202.40, Couple: \$298.90,

Family: \$362.15

This will get you into the gym through the end of May!



Gift
Certificates
Available!

Daily Pass Available for \$5

Age 65 or older
Physical Therapy
\$20 per month

Annual Memberships:

Student: \$255.60

Single: \$319.50

Couple: \$575.10

Family: \$702.26



15 N Main St. - Ste. 101

Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



Living Heart Fitness Center

Open 24/7

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

December 17, 2024 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Wastewater Improvement Project Hearing
4. Resolution No. 20244 – Authorizing an Application for Financial Assistance, Authorizing the Execution and Submittal of the Application, and Designating an Authorized Representative to Certify and Sign Payment Requests
5. Electric/Water Metering
6. Second Reading of Ordinance No. 783 – Supplemental Appropriations #2
7. 2024 Legion Baseball Reimbursement Adjustment
8. Offer from BNSF to Close Railroad Crossing on East Aspen Avenue
9. Authorization for Cash Fund Transfer
10. Review Repair Estimate and Loss Recap from SDPAA for Hail Damaged Buildings and Execute Proof of Loss
11. November Finance Report
12. Minutes
13. Bills
14. Announcement: City Offices Closed on January 1st for New Years Day
15. Reminder: Holiday Lighting Contest on December 19th - \$100, \$75, & \$50 Utility Bill Credits to be Given Away
16. Reminder: 2025 Dog Licenses are Due by December 31st, 2024
17. Joint Utility Training School on Jan. 21st – 23rd, 2025 – Sioux Falls, SD – Landon Johnson
18. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
19. Hire Skating Rink Applicants and Establish Wage
20. Adjournment

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Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

Although I will never admit to cheering for the Packers, Green Bay gave the Vikings a gift Sunday night when they defeated the Seattle Seahawks which punched Minnesota's ticket to the postseason. With that locked up, the Vikings turned their attention to the visiting Bears, who are out of the playoffs but still a threat to steal a win.

The game started well for the Vikings. Chicago got the ball to begin the game and four plays later gave it right to the Vikings after a failed fourth down. The Vikings didn't pick up a first down on their first possession either, but because of the great field position it didn't matter, so they kicked a field goal to go up 3-0. Bears' QB Caleb Williams fumbled the ball on their next possession, once again giving the Vikings great field position, and five plays later Sam Darnold hit Justin Jefferson for a seven-yard touchdown and a 10-point lead. The Bears were forced to punt on their third possession of the first quarter, and this was looking like it might be a blowout.

After a great punt, the Vikings got the ball at their nine-yard line and put together a 15-play drive. But on 4th & three at Chicago's 23-yard line, Darnold was under heavy pressure and threw an interception (after which the Bears' defender mocked the skol chant, which has historically never worked out well for opposing teams). The Bears responded with a nice drive of their own, but once again turned the ball over on downs 11 plays later. With two and a half minutes left in the first half, the Vikings methodically moved down the field and kicked another field goal, making the score 13-0 heading into halftime.

The Vikings got the ball to start the second half, and three plays later they had gone backwards 10 yards and were forced to punt. Thinking it was a game of hot potato, the Bears punted on their next drive, followed by yet another Vikings punt. On their second drive of the half, the Bears got to the Vikings' one-yard line, but after a Chicago TD was taken off the board they eventually had to settle for a field goal, making the score 13-3 Minnesota. Sensing the momentum start to shift, the Vikings responded with a 12-play, 70-yard drive that ended with an Aaron Jones one-yard TD run, extending the lead to 17 points heading into the fourth quarter.

The Bears kicked a field goal on their first possession of the fourth quarter, and the Vikings responded with a touchdown, making the score 27-6. The two teams then traded punts, but the Vikings' punt was blocked which gave the Bears great field position. The Bears finally found the endzone with just over five minutes left in the game, but they failed the two points attempt, making the score 27-12. Chicago tried a desperate onside kick attempt, which was recovered by Minnesota. Four minutes later, the Vikings kicked a field goal to make the score 30-12, which is where it remained when the final whistle blew.

Sam Darnold had a rough game, completing 24 of 40 passes for 231 yards, one touchdown and one interception.

Aaron Jones ran the ball 18 times for 86 yards and a touchdown, and Cam Akers added another 24 yards and a touchdown on 10 carries.

Justin Jefferson had seven catches for 73 yards and a touchdown. Jordan Addison also had seven catches, with his going for 63 scoreless yards.

Defensively, Jonathan Greenard had a strip sack (which was recovered by Blake Cashman), and a tackle for a loss. Rookie Dallas Turner also recorded a sack, his first since week one.

Looking ahead, the Vikings travel to Seattle to battle the 8-6 Seahawks. The Vikings open as 4.5-point favorites, but Seattle always puts up a fight and they have a great home-field advantage. If the Vikings can win out, they will lock up the number one seed in the playoffs. Skol!

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**BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY**

December 17, 2024 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity for Public Comment
4. First Reading of following Ordinances:
 - a. Ord #284 – Rezone
 - b. Ord #285 - Rezone
5. IMEG
 - a. Brown County Bridge Inspections Report
6. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign FHWA Adjusted Urban Boundary Map
7. Rachel Kippley, Fair/Fairgrounds/Parks Manager
 - a. Hay-ground Leases
 - b. Fair Board Member Resignation
 - c. Contracts
 - i. Ashley Wineland
 - ii. Forever S & G Tribute
 - iii. ZZ-3
 - iv. Coke Contract 2024-2027
 - d. Fairground Liquor License
 - e. Clubhouse Bid Recommendation
 - f. Fairground Improvement Fund
 - g. Department Update
8. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of December 10, 2024
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Auditor's Report of Accounts
 - e. Claim Assignments
 - f. Liquor License Renewals
 - g. Travel Requests
9. Other Business
10. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
11. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

<https://meet.goto.com/BrCoCommission>

You can also dial in using your phone. United States: +1 (872) 240-3311

Access Code: 601-168-909 #

Get the app now and be ready when your first meeting starts: <https://meet.goto.com/install>

Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/departments/commission>

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NSU Men's Basketball

Wolves Drop Non-Conference Contest to the Jimmies

Aberdeen, S.D. – In their final non-conference game of the season, the Northern State University men's basketball team fell to the University of Jamestown.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 62, UJ 77

Records: NSU 1-9, UJ 5-6

Attendance: 1008

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Wolves scored 29 points in the first and 33 in the second, while the Jimmies tallied 44 and 33

Northern shot 40.8% from the floor, 47.8% from the 3-point line, and 64.7% from the foul line

They scored 20 points off the bench, 18 points in the paint, and 15 points of turnovers, while UJ recorded 35 points off the bench, 32 points in the paint, and 23 points off turnovers

The Jimmies out-rebounded the Wolves 38-29 in the game, however the Wolves led the contest with ten blocks

Marcus Burks and Braeden Vanbockern led the team with 16 points apiece; a career high for Vanbockern off the bench

James Glenn followed adding 12 points, five rebounds, and four assists, while Burks tallied a team leading seven rebounds and added three assists

Burks, Glenn, and Vanbockern each notched two steals in the game and Kaleb Mitchell led the team with three blocks

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Marcus Burks: 16 points, 55.6 field goal%, 7 rebounds, 3 assists, 2 steals, 1 block

Braeden Vanbockern: 16 points, 62.5 field goal%, 2 steals, 1 rebound

James Glenn: 12 points, 4 made 3-pointers, 4 assists, 5 rebounds, 2 steals, 1 block

UP NEXT

Northern returns home this Friday and Saturday against Minnesota Crookston and Minot State. Tip-off times are set for 7:30 p.m. on Friday against the Golden Eagles and 6 p.m. on Saturday versus the Beavers.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem issues seven more pardons since September

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 16, 2024 3:41 PM

Gov. Kristi Noem has issued seven pardons this fall, bringing the total number she's granted since taking office to 348.

The pardons went to people convicted of a range of misdemeanors and low-level felonies, including decades-old repeat DUI convictions, drug possession and domestic disorderly conduct. All seven pardons were signed on Nov. 27.

Noem has yet to issue any new commutations since the summer, when she commuted the sentences of two people convicted of murder in 1971 and 1999, respectively. Commutations shrink existing sentences, typically allowing an inmate a chance at early release. Pardons, by contrast, remove a conviction from a person's record entirely. Noem has issued 27 commutations since her first term began in 2019.

In South Dakota, the state Board of Pardons and Paroles recommends clemency after hearing from the person requesting it, unless the person qualifies for a "paper review" based on having a lower-level offense. All but one of the most recent pardons resulted from paper reviews, the other one resulted from a hearing, and all received positive recommendations.

A majority vote of the board's nine members sends the recommendation to the governor, who has the sole discretion to issue pardons and commutations under the South Dakota Constitution.

After Noem grants clemency, pardons and commutations are filed with the secretary of state. Pardons are sealed five years later.

The governor hasn't always waited for or concurred with the board in her clemency decisions. In 2022, she commuted the sentence of Tammy Kvasnicka, who was convicted of vehicular homicide for a 2010 Sioux Falls traffic crash. The board had recommended denial for Kvasnicka. That commutation and six others were issued right around Christmas in 2022.

Just after Christmas last year, Noem commuted the sentences of 12 people convicted for felony drug ingestion. That charge, which is unique to South Dakota, allows prosecutions for drug possession based on a failed drug test. None of the 12 people whose ingestion charges were commuted last Dec. 29 had applied for a commutation through the parole board. In her State of the State speech delivered 11 days after signing the commutations, the governor told lawmakers that the state believes in second chances, and that the people offered them through her commutations will have the chance to return to work and take care of their families.

"If South Dakotans do get involved in drugs or another aspect of crime, that should not be the final word," Noem said in the Jan. 9 speech. "Their punishment should match their crime, but they should also have the opportunity to rehabilitate and become better, more capable members of our society."

The most recent pardons may be some of Noem's last. She has been nominated by President-elect Donald Trump to serve as the next Department of Homeland Security secretary. Trump takes office on Jan. 20, and a Senate vote to confirm Noem could come soon afterward.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

Native American patients are sent to collections for debts the government owes

BY: KATHERYN HOUGHTON, KFF HEALTH NEWS AND ARIELLE ZIONTS, KFF HEALTH NEWS - DECEMBER 16, 2024 2:10 PM

Tescha Hawley learned that hospital bills from her son's birth had been sent to debt collectors only when she checked her credit score while attending a home-buying class. The new mom's plans to buy a house stalled.

Hawley said she didn't owe those thousands of dollars in debts. The federal government did. Hawley, a citizen of the Gros Ventre Tribe, lives on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana. The Indian Health Service is a federal agency that provides free health care to Native Americans, but its services are limited by a chronic shortage of funding and staff.

Hawley's local Indian Health Service hospital wasn't equipped to deliver babies. But she said staff there agreed that the agency would pay for her care at a privately owned hospital more than an hour away.

That arrangement came through the Purchased/Referred Care program, which pays for services Native Americans can't get through an agency-funded clinic or hospital. Federal law stresses that patients approved for the program aren't responsible for any of the costs.

But tribal leaders, health officials, and a new federal report say patients are routinely billed anyway as a result of backlogs or mistakes from the Indian Health Service, financial middlemen, hospitals, and clinics.

The financial consequences for patients can last years. Those sent to collections can face damaged credit scores, which can prevent them from securing loans or require them to pay higher interest rates.

The December report, by the federal Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, found these long-standing problems contribute to people in Native American-majority communities being nearly twice as likely to have medical debt in collections compared with the national average. And their amount of medical debt is significantly higher.

The report found the program is often late to pay bills. In some cases, hospitals or collection agencies hound tribal citizens for more money after bills are paid.

Hawley's son was born in 2003. She had to wait another year to buy a home, as she struggled to pay off the debt. It took seven years for it to drop from her credit report.

"I don't think a person ever recovers from debt," Hawley said.

Hawley, a cancer survivor, still must navigate the referral program. In 2024 alone, she received two notices from clinics about overdue bills.

Frank White Clay, chairman of the Crow Tribe in Montana, testified about the impact of wrongful billing during a U.S. House committee hearing in April. He shared stories of veterans rejected for home loans, elders whose Social Security benefits were reduced, and students denied college loans and federal aid.

"Some of the most vulnerable people are being harassed daily by debt collectors," White Clay said.

No one is immune from the risk. A high-ranking Indian Health Service official learned during her job's background check that her credit report contained referred-care debt, the federal report found.

Native Americans face disproportionately high rates of poverty and disease, which researchers link to limited access to health care and the ongoing impact of racist federal policies.

White Clay is among many who say problems with the referred-care program are an example of the U.S. government violating treaties that promised to provide for the health and welfare of tribes in return for their land.

The chairman's testimony came during a hearing on the Purchased and Referred Care Improvement Act, which would require the Indian Health Service to create a reimbursement process for patients who were wrongfully billed. Committee members approved the bill in November and sent it for consideration by the full House.

A second federal bill, the Protecting Native Americans' Credit Act, would prevent debt like Hawley's from affecting patients' credit scores. The bipartisan bill hadn't had a hearing by mid-December.

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The exact number of people wrongfully billed isn't clear, but the Indian Health Service has acknowledged it has work to do.

The agency is developing a dashboard to help workers track referrals and to speed up bill processing, spokesperson Brendan White said. It's also trying to hire more referred-care staff, to address vacancy rates of more than 30%.

Officials say problems with the program also stem from outside health providers that don't follow the rules.

Melanie Egorin, an assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said at the hearing that the proposed legislation doesn't include consequences for "bad actors" — health facilities that repeatedly bill patients when they shouldn't.

"The lack of enforcement is definitely a challenge," she said.

But tribal leaders warned that penalties could backfire.

White Clay told lawmakers that some clinics already refuse to see patients if the Indian Health Service hasn't paid for their previous appointments. He's worried the threat of penalties would lead to more refusals.

If that happens, White Clay said, Crow tribal members who already travel hours to access specialty treatment would have to go even farther.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau report found clinics are already refusing to see any referred-care patients due to the program's payment problems.

The bureau and the Indian Health Service also recently published a letter urging health care providers and debt collectors not to hold patients accountable for program-approved care.

White, the Indian Health Service spokesperson, said the agency recently updated the referred-care forms sent to outside hospitals and clinics to include billing instructions and to stress that patients aren't liable for any out-of-pocket costs. And he said the staff can help patients get reimbursed if they have already paid for services that were supposed to be covered.

Joe Bryant, an Indian Health Service official who oversees efforts to improve the referral program, said patients can ask credit bureaus to remove debt from their reports if the agency should have covered their bills.

Leaders with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Washington state helped shape the proposed legislation after their citizens were repeatedly harmed by wrongful billing.

Tribal Chairman Jarred-Michael Erickson said problems began in 2017, when a regional Indian Health Service office took over the referred-care program from local staff.

It "created a domino effect of negative outcomes," Erickson wrote in a letter to Congress.

He said some tribal members whose finances were damaged stopped using the Indian Health Service. Others avoided health care altogether.

Responsibility for the Colville Reservation program transferred back to local staff in 2022. Staffers found the billing process hadn't been completed for thousands of cases, worth an estimated \$24 million in medical care, Erickson told lawmakers.

Workers are making progress on the backlog and they have explained the rules to outside hospitals and clinics, Erickson said. But he said there are still cases of wrongful billing, such as a tribal member who was sent to collections after receiving a \$17,000 bill for chemotherapy that the agency was supposed to pay for.

Erickson said the tribe is in the process of taking over its health care facilities instead of having the Indian Health Service run them. He and others who work in Native American health said tribally managed units — which are still funded by the federal agency — tend to have fewer problems with their referred-care programs.

For example, they have more oversight over staff and flexibility to create their own payment tracking systems.

But some Native Americans oppose tribal management because they feel it releases the federal government from its obligations.

Beyond wrongful billing, access to the referred-care program is limited because of underfunding from Congress. The \$1 billion budget this year is \$9 billion short of the need, according to a committee report by tribal health and government leaders.

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Donald Warne, a physician and member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, called the proposed legislation a "band-aid." He said the ultimate solution is for Congress to fully fund the Indian Health Service, which would reduce the need for the referred-care program.

Back in Montana, Hawley said she braces for a fight each time she gets a bill that the referral program was supposed to cover.

"I've learned not to trust the process," Hawley said.

Katheryn Houghton, Montana correspondent for KFF Health News, covers health policy and politics, access to treatment, and the business of health care in that state. Previously, she reported on health care issues for newspapers including the Bozeman Daily Chronicle and the Daily Inter Lake. Katheryn was an Association of Health Care Journalists fellow. She is a graduate of the University of Montana.

Arielle Zions, rural health care correspondent for KFF Health News, is based in South Dakota. She primarily covers South Dakota and its neighboring states and tribal nations. Arielle previously worked at South Dakota Public Broadcasting, where she reported on business and economic development. Before that, she was the criminal justice reporter at the Rapid City Journal and a general assignment reporter at the Nogales International, on the border of Arizona and Mexico. She graduated from Pitzer College in Claremont, California. Arielle lives in Rapid City with her cat, Sully.

COMMENTARY

Noem proposal would fund Christian 'segregation academies'

by Rick Snedeker

To hear South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem tell it, her newly proposed and euphemistically named "Education Savings Account" program is all about giving disadvantaged parents the "freedom" to choose an "education that's best" for their children.

But that's not what it's really all about.

It's end-goal in practical terms is to give qualifying parents some \$3,000 per student in tax money to send their children to religious schools — 77% of private schools nationwide are Christian — where, not coincidentally, faith indoctrination is allowed in the academic curriculum and ideas such as abortion, gender fluidity and sexual diversity (supposedly rejected in the Bible as "unnatural" abominations) are formally demonized. And where ideas like the still-enduring and severe institutional inequities still burdening Black citizens in America — characterized as "America-hating" by naysayers — are pointedly not taught.

This disingenuous (meaning dishonest and, thus, arguably un-Christian) use of the term "choice" regarding educational goals has been bandied about for 68 years, since the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that race-segregated public schooling in America was unconstitutional. Almost immediately thereafter, Whites-only, tax-exempt private schools, known as "segregation academies," began robustly sprouting in the South to circumvent the Court's edict.

By 1958, more than a million Southern students were attending these academies, as state legislatures during the next seven years passed hundreds of new laws "attempting to block, postpone, limit, or evade the desegregation of public schools, many of which expressly authorized the systematic transfer of public assets and monies to private schools," according to a study titled "A History of Private Schools and Race in the American South," cited by the Southern Education Foundation in 2023.

The high court then vacillated over a number of years between allowing and then disallowing tax exemptions for nonprofit private schools, religious and secular, but in 1983's *Bob Jones University v. The United States* the Court also disallowed such tax benefits for private religious schools if they discriminated by race in policies or practices, or favor one religion. Previously, the K-college school's curriculum was taught from a biblical perspective, teachers were required to be devout Christians, university donors and administrators held that the Bible prohibited interracial dating and marriage, and African Americans were ineligible for enrollment.

This should be a no-brainer. The Second Amendment's freedom-of-religion clause was created so that

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no single religion could dominate our nation, as Christianity had lorded over Europe for centuries, with catastrophic consequences when Catholicism splintered into myriad Christian sects during and after the tumultuous Protestant Reformation. During the 30 Years War (1618-1648) fought between Catholic and Protestant states in the Holy Roman Empire for religious hegemony in Europe, an estimated 8 million Europeans died from combat, famine and disease.

This kind of religious sectarian catastrophe is exactly what the American Founding Fathers were trying to avoid by establishing a constitutional requirement of religious freedom and sectarian non-coercion in their fledgling republic.

The problem since is that although U.S. leaders have labored mightily to achieve that, the lion's share of Americans, despite the diverse abundance of religious denominations they have subscribed to, have been and remain predominantly Christian (68% today) — so Christian privilege, because of the faith's ubiquity in its many forms, is a dominant cultural force that has proved domineering and coercive in U.S. culture.

That's why Congress, under Christian pressure and general political fear — arguably unconstitutionally — changed the U.S. motto to "In God We Trust" from a secular phrase and inscribed our money with it, and arbitrarily inserted "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance during the 1950's "Red Scare" over godless Communism.

And why the Supreme Court today, with its mostly devout Catholic justices and a 6-3 conservative bent, ruled on June 21 this year in *Carson v. Makin* that states that provided education vouchers for students to attend private secular schools would be discriminating against religion if faith-school vouchers were not also provided. This opens the door wide for required taxpayer support for Christian and Catholic parochial schools nationwide — and growing religious incursions into the tax-supported American public square.

The Founders surely would have balked at such.

Although Gov. Noem did not mention Christianity or God in her Dec. 3 address to the Legislature proposing her 2026 Education Savings Account program, they were loudly implied. With the lion's share of private schools being Christian, in our state as well as America writ large, it's a good bet that much if not most of the \$4 million she estimates her plan will cost the first year would go toward indoctrinating eligible kids in the Bible and its invisible deity, and teaching watery history.

Let's call them Christian "segregation academies."

Rick Snedeker, a retired journalist living in Mitchell, is the author of a 2020 memoir about growing up in a Saudi oil camp in the 1950s, "3,001 Arabian Days," and a 2022 historical overview of Christianity's coercive evolution in America, "Holy Smoke."

Trump at press conference backs polio vaccine but won't commit to others, attacks media

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 16, 2024 3:56 PM

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump pledged Monday to keep the polio vaccine available throughout his presidency, but didn't extend that protection to other vaccines, saying he expects his administration will look closely at safety — something the U.S. Food and Drug Administration already does before granting approval.

Trump's comments came during an hour-long press conference where he hinted at trying to privatize the Postal Service and said he planned to file a lawsuit against a presidential preference poll published by The Des Moines Register that found him trailing Vice President Kamala Harris in the last days before the election.

Trump, who will take the oath of office on Jan. 20, also said he would solve the war between Ukraine and Russia and establish the Middle East as a "good place," though he declined to provide details.

"Starting on day one, we'll implement a rapid series of bold reforms to restore our nation to full prosperity," Trump said in his first formal back-and-forth with reporters since the Nov. 5 election. "We're going to

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go full prosperity and to build the greatest economy the world has ever seen, just as we had just a short time ago.”

Trump said he expects Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the vaccine denier he has said he will nominate to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, will be “much less radical” than some people expect.

Trump said Kennedy and others in his administration will file reports sharing what they think about vaccines, but didn’t say what actions might be taken after those reports are released.

Trump said he didn’t like the idea of mandating vaccines, but didn’t go as far as saying he’d change vaccine policy for parts of the federal government, like the Defense Department, which has numerous requirements for troops, including the so-called peanut butter shot.

Kennedy is notorious for spreading misinformation about vaccine safety, one of the many issues that could imperil his attempts to garner U.S. Senate confirmation and actually lead HHS.

Trump said he wanted this administration to look at why autism rates have increased in recent decades. Multiple research studies have debunked any connections between vaccines and autism.

His administration, Trump said, would also look at ways to lower the costs of health care and prescription drugs within the United States, but he didn’t provide details.

Lawsuit threats

Trump doubled down on his grievances with news organizations during the press conference at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, saying he planned to file several lawsuits in the days and weeks ahead against people or organizations he believes have wronged him.

The announcement came just days after Trump’s legal team reached a settlement with ABC News in which the news organization agreed to pay \$15 million to Trump’s presidential library.

The suit centered on anchor George Stephanopoulos saying during an interview that a New York state jury had found Trump liable for the rape of writer E. Jean Carroll, when the jury had found him civilly liable for “sexual misconduct.”

Trump said during his press conference that he would likely file lawsuits against Iowa pollster J. Ann Selzer, the news show “60 Minutes” and the Pulitzer Prize organization for awards given to the New York Times and Washington Post.

“In my opinion it was fraud and election interference,” he said of the Iowa Poll published by the Des Moines newspaper. “She’s got me right, always. She’s a very good pollster. She knows what she was doing, and she then quit before and we’ll probably be filing a major lawsuit against them today or tomorrow.”

Selzer, a longtime pollster, said last week on Iowa PBS that she hadn’t yet figured out what went wrong with the poll she released just ahead of Election Day that showed Democratic presidential nominee Harris outperforming Trump in the state by 3 percentage points. Trump won Iowa in the election with 56% of the vote to her 42.7%.

“There wasn’t anything that we saw that needed to be fixed. The reality is that more people supporting Donald Trump turned out,” she said. “I’m eagerly awaiting the secretary of state’s turnout reports that will happen in January to see what we can glean from that.

“But there wasn’t an adjustment to my data when we saw that it was going to be a shocker that I would have said okay, let’s adjust it. It’s not like I know ahead of time what the right numbers are going to be in the future. So, you kind of take the data designed to reveal to me our best shot at what the future is going to look like.”

Selzer said during the PBS interview that she was “mystified” about allegations that she sought to interfere in the election results through the poll. Carol Hunter, executive editor of The Des Moines Register, could not be reached for comment.

Trump said he also planned to sue the CBS News program “60 Minutes” over how it edited an interview with Harris that was released before the election.

He said he wants to sue the Pulitzer Prize organization for awarding staff at The New York Times and The Washington Post the national reporting award in 2018 for their reporting on “Russian interference in

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the 2016 presidential election and its connections to the Trump campaign, the President-elect's transition team and his eventual administration."

"I want them to take back the Pulitzer Prizes and pay big damages," Trump said.

The Pulitzer Prize Board announced in July 2022 that it would not revoke the prizes in response to an inquiry from Trump and two independent reviews of the work.

"Both reviews were conducted by individuals with no connection to the institutions whose work was under examination, nor any connection to each other," the board wrote. "The separate reviews converged in their conclusions: that no passages or headlines, contentions or assertions in any of the winning submissions were discredited by facts that emerged subsequent to the conferral of the prizes.

"The 2018 Pulitzer Prizes in National Reporting stand."

Israel and Ukraine

Trump said during his press conference that he would address the ongoing Israel-Gaza war as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine once he takes office, but didn't say exactly how he'd encourage those countries to end their conflicts.

Trump said he believed that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is doing a "fantastic job" and said he thinks his second administration will be able to solve longstanding issues throughout the Middle East.

"I think the Middle East will be in a good place," Trump said. "I think actually more difficult is going to be the Russia-Ukraine situation. I see that as more difficult."

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and has refused to leave the country's borders. In the years since Russia launched a war, numerous organizations, including the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have all made allegations of war crimes against Russia.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken released a statement in February 2023 that "Russia's forces and other Russian officials have committed crimes against humanity in Ukraine."

Russia, he wrote, had engaged in torture, rape, execution-style killings and "deported hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian civilians to Russia, including children who have been forcibly separated from their families."

Trump said during his press conference that he didn't believe the Biden administration should have allowed Ukraine to shoot long-range missiles into Russia's sovereign territory and said he may reverse the policy once in office.

"I thought it was a very stupid thing to do," Trump said of the Biden administration's policy.

On the Israel-Hamas war, Trump declined to clarify exactly what he meant when he said there would be "hell to pay" if Hamas had not released the remaining hostages abducted in October 2023 before Trump took over the Oval Office. He simply added that it "would not be pleasant."

Postal Service, TikTok, primary challengers

Trump left many questions about his agenda unanswered following the press conference.

He declined to clarify whether he would press to privatize the U.S. Postal Service, saying only that there was "talk" about severing the agency and that his team is "looking at that."

He didn't divulge whether his administration would seek to force social media giant TikTok to divest from its Chinese parent company if it wants to remain operational within the United States. TikTok on Monday asked the U.S. Supreme Court for a stay of an appeals court order preserving a bipartisan law forcing ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, to cease operations in the United States.

"We'll take a look at that," Trump said.

He left open supporting Republican primary challenges against GOP senators who don't support his nominees to lead federal departments and agencies.

A senator voting against one of his nominees "for political reasons or stupid reasons" would likely earn them a primary challenger, he said. But Trump added that wouldn't have anything to do with him.

Trump also declined to say whether he expected Chinese leader Xi Jinping to attend his inauguration

after extending an invitation.

"If he'd like to come, I'd love to have him, but there's been nothing much discussed," Trump said. "I have had discussions with him, letters, etc, etc, at a very high level. You know, we had a very good relationship until COVID. COVID didn't end the relationship, but it was a bridge too far for me."

Trump then added he believes Xi is "an amazing person."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

Despite Trump's claim, deportations likely wouldn't ease housing crisis, most experts say

At best, the link is tenuous; at worst, far fewer homes would get built

BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA - DECEMBER 16, 2024 11:00 AM

The mass deportations of immigrants that President-elect Donald Trump has promised aren't likely to make a dent in the nation's housing crisis, many experts say, despite what he and his supporters claimed during his campaign.

Experts say the reasons for that are many. Immigrants in the U.S. without documentation are more likely to live in low-income rental housing than they are to live in higher-income areas or to buy homes. They often live in multigenerational groups with many people in a household. And they are a key cog in the construction industry, meaning fewer homes would get built without their labor.

Yet, as the United States' ongoing housing crisis grew more visible this year, Trump seized on immigration as a chief cause.

"Immigration is driving housing costs through the roof," he said at a September rally in Arizona.

U.S. Sen. J.D. Vance, the incoming vice president, in his October debate against Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Walz, went further, arguing that "illegal aliens competing with Americans for scarce homes is one of the most significant drivers of home prices in the country."

Neither of those statements is true, according to many housing and immigration experts.

The relationship between immigration and housing affordability is far more nuanced, housing experts say. At best, immigration has an understated effect on the housing crisis. At worst, large-scale deportation plans could cripple an already strained construction labor industry heavily reliant on low-wage workers in the country without authorization.

Unable to meet most requirements for a mortgage on a home, immigrants living in the U.S. illegally often rely on extremely affordable rental housing. And multigenerational living is more common due to economic necessity, said Riordan Frost, a senior research analyst with the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies.

In recent years, he added, members of the millennial generation — not immigrants — have driven the rise in new households, especially during the pandemic.

"It's important to push back against the argument that housing for one group comes at the cost of another," Frost said.

'Voters have expressed support'

More than 22 million people were living in households in 2022 with at least one immigrant who's not in the United States legally — about 6.3 million households in total, according to Pew Research Center data.

Homes with immigrants living here illegally are just 4.8% of the United States' 130 million households, according to Pew. In 86% of those households, either the head of the household or their spouse didn't have legal authorization.

And with a major demographic shift in the coming decade — a large, aging baby boom generation and declining birth rates — the United States will need immigrants or begin to lose population, Frost said.

He pointed to a January demographic outlook report from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, which notes that "net immigration increasingly drives population growth, accounting for all population

growth beginning in 2040.”

Some housing experts say the math Trump describes can work out: Deporting immigrants living here without authorization would open more housing space, which could lower housing costs overall.

“Deporting 2 million individuals would reduce housing demand and relieve supply constraints, because those 2 million individuals are living in homes somewhere,” said Edward Pinto, a senior fellow and co-director of the AEI Housing Center at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute.

Pinto acknowledged that immigrants living in the U.S. illegally aren’t the sole driver of the housing crisis, citing the high cost of land and ineffective affordable housing programs as other barriers.

Yet while Trump’s plan for mass deportations has drawn criticism and partisan opinion, Pinto said it is in direct response to American voters’ fears about immigration.

“The voters have expressed support for deportation and repatriation,” said Pinto, who emphasized that Trump has pledged to focus first on deporting people with criminal convictions.

Uncertain market effects

If anything, some brokers say, deportations could hurt rental property owners. Any impact would most likely be felt first in among apartments in low-income communities, some brokers told Stateline.

Jeff Lichtenstein, who owns a real estate company in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, said the effects would ripple beyond the low-cost rental market, where many immigrants without documentation are tenants. A decline in rental prices in extremely low-income areas could create a domino effect, he said, dragging down prices in higher-priced rental categories and eventually affecting home sales.

“As cheaper rentals become more accessible, individuals who might otherwise save for a down payment on a home could opt to rent instead, slowing housing sales and potentially driving down home values across price points,” Lichtenstein said.

Meanwhile, the nation relies heavily on immigrant labor, including workers who are living in the United States illegally, to build new homes.

According to National Association of Home Builders data from 2022, immigrants account for at least 40% of the construction labor force in California and Texas, and for at least 30% in Florida, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey and New York. Certain occupations are especially reliant on immigrant workers — plasterers, drywall installers and roofers among them.

In disaster-prone areas such as Florida, labor shortages driven by deportations could delay essential repairs and, if property owners can’t get them done, drive up insurance costs after storms, said Renata Castro, an immigration attorney in Coral Springs, Florida.

Those shortages also jack up repair costs, she added, which in turn affects housing prices when property sellers pass along those expenses.

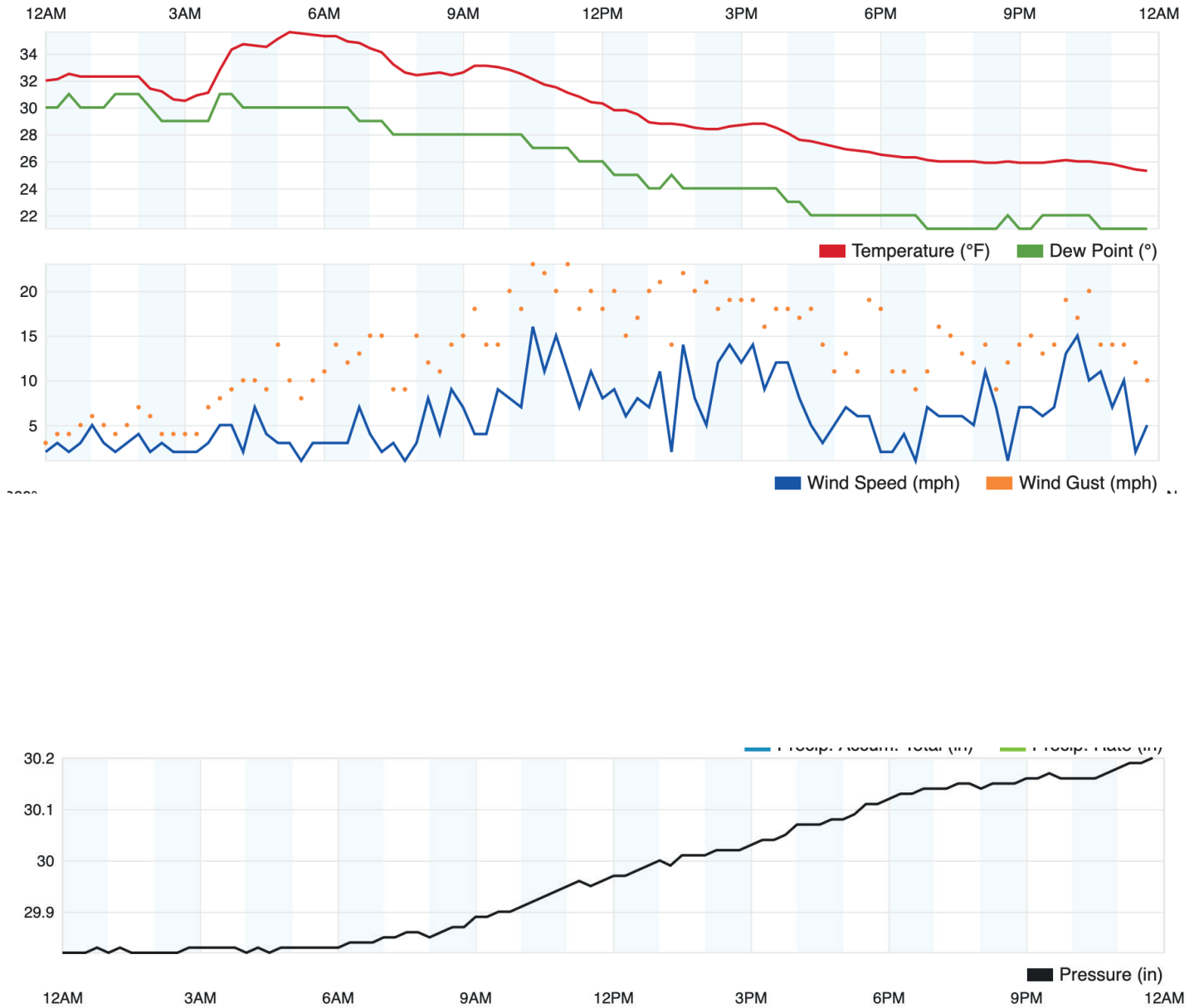
“From roofers to plumbers, the demand for labor is insatiable,” Castro said. “However, Americans refuse to fill these positions — jobs they do not want to do.”

Robbie Sequeira is a staff writer covering housing and social services for Stateline.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 22 °F

Chance Snow

Tonight



Low: 9 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Wednesday



High: 21 °F

Mostly Sunny

Wednesday
Night



Low: 12 °F

Chance Snow

Thursday



High: 27 °F

Chance Snow
and Patchy
Blowing Snow



Accumulating Snow Today

December 17, 2024
4:19 AM

Banded Snow Expected Across South Central to East Central South Dakota

What

An area of snow will track across portions of south central to east central South Dakota today. **A band of higher snow amounts, up to 4 or 5 inches,** will occur south of Highway 14 to Interstate 90.

When

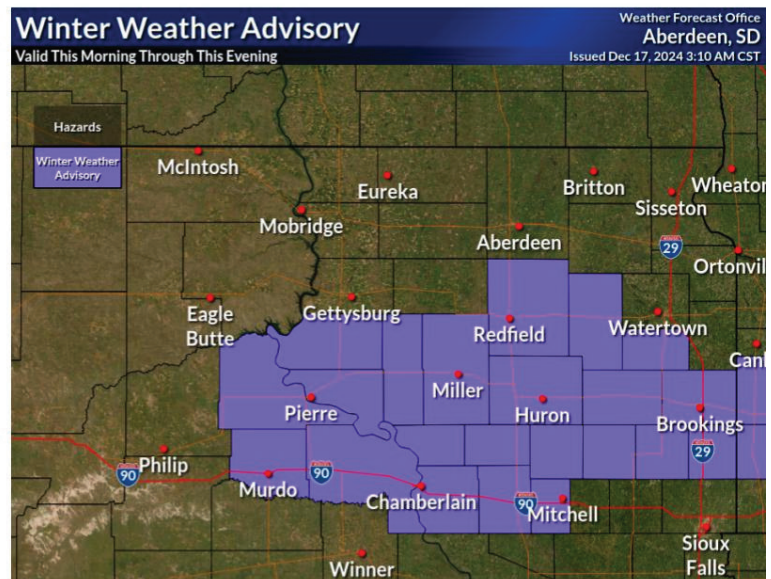
Beginning early this morning over south central SD and spreading eastward through east central SD

Impacts

Plan on slippery road conditions. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning and evening commutes

NEW New Updates

A **Winter Weather Advisory** has been issued through this evening



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

An area of snow will track across portions of south central to east central South Dakota today. A band of higher snow amounts, up to 4 or 5 inches, will occur south of Highway 14 to Interstate 90.

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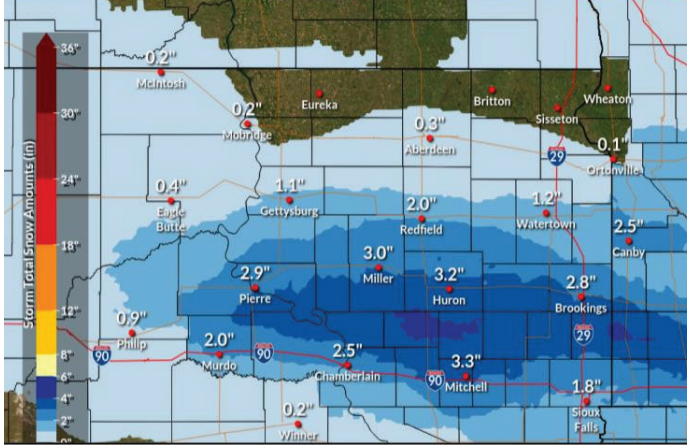
Snowfall Totals

December 17, 2024
4:21 AM

Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast

Valid 6 AM Tue Dec 17, 2024 through 12 AM Wed Dec 18, 2024 CST

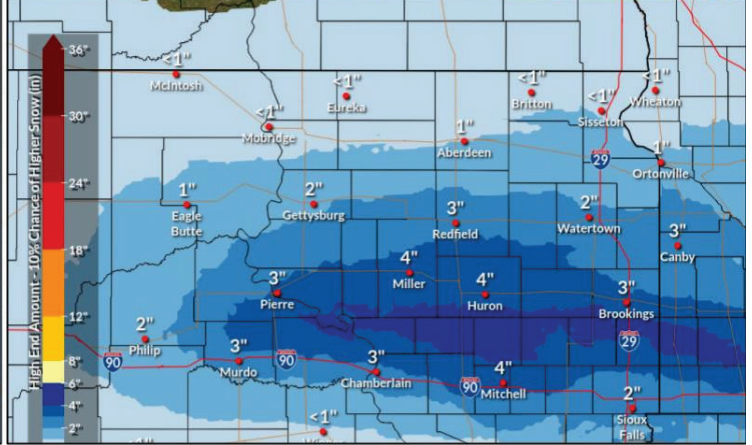
Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Dec 17, 2024 1:50 AM CST



High End Amount - 1 in 10 Chance (10%) Of Higher Snowfall

Valid 6 AM Tue Dec 17, 2024 through 12 AM Wed Dec 18, 2024 CST

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Dec 17, 2024 1:50 AM CST



- **Left Graphic- Expected snowfall totals:** A band of higher snow amounts, up to 4 or 5 inches, will occur south of Highway 14 to Interstate 90
- **Right Graphic- High End Amount (1 in 10 chance)** of receiving these higher end amounts
- **Banded snowfall is tricky to predict and subject to change!** Confidence is high on the snow event with lower confidence on exact snowfall totals. A potentially stronger band of snow would increase snowfall totals. Any shift in the track will result in shift of higher snowfall amounts

Confidence is high on the snow event with lower confidence on snowfall totals. A potentially stronger band of snow would increase snowfall totals. Any shift in the track of the system will bring a shift in the higher snowfall totals.



Snowfall Timing

December 17, 2024
4:26 AM

Weather Forecast

	12/17 Tue														
	5am	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm
Aberdeen	5%	5%	5%	10%	15%	20%	20%	25%	20%	15%	10%	10%	5%	5%	0%
Britton	0%	0%	5%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%
Brookings	10%	20%	25%	30%	55%	60%	60%	50%	50%	55%	55%	55%	60%	30%	30%
Chamberlain	15%	30%	35%	35%	40%	40%	35%	25%	25%	30%	25%	25%	25%	0%	0%
Clark	5%	5%	10%	15%	20%	35%	45%	60%	65%	70%	75%	55%	30%	5%	5%
Eagle Butte	20%	20%	30%	35%	45%	35%	25%	10%	10%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Ellendale	0%	0%	5%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%	5%	0%
Eureka	5%	5%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%	0%	0%	0%
Gettysburg	15%	15%	25%	30%	40%	40%	45%	45%	30%	20%	5%	5%	5%	0%	0%
Huron	15%	35%	40%	45%	70%	75%	75%	65%	75%	75%	60%	60%	60%	25%	25%
Kennebec	20%	50%	55%	60%	65%	65%	70%	75%	50%	25%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
McIntosh	15%	15%	15%	15%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Milbank	0%	0%	0%	5%	5%	10%	20%	25%	30%	35%	40%	30%	15%	5%	5%
Miller	15%	25%	40%	60%	75%	80%	85%	65%	45%	25%	15%	10%	5%	5%	5%
Mobridge	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	10%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Murdo	20%	50%	60%	65%	70%	60%	50%	45%	30%	15%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Pierre	15%	50%	60%	65%	70%	65%	65%	60%	40%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Redfield	10%	5%	15%	25%	40%	50%	55%	65%	55%	45%	35%	25%	15%	5%	5%
Sisseton	0%	0%	0%	5%	5%	10%	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	10%	10%	5%	5%
Watertown	5%	5%	5%	5%	10%	20%	35%	45%	55%	65%	75%	55%	30%	5%	5%
Webster	5%	5%	5%	10%	10%	15%	25%	30%	25%	25%	20%	15%	10%	5%	5%
Wheaton	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	5%	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	5%	5%

- Light snow (65-85%) will spread from south central SD eastward through east central SD through the day
- Snow will diminish west to east across the forecast area late this afternoon through the evening
- Please visit our **Facebook** and **X** social media sites for the latest updates on the forecast
- Visit <https://www.sd511.org/> for the latest road conditions



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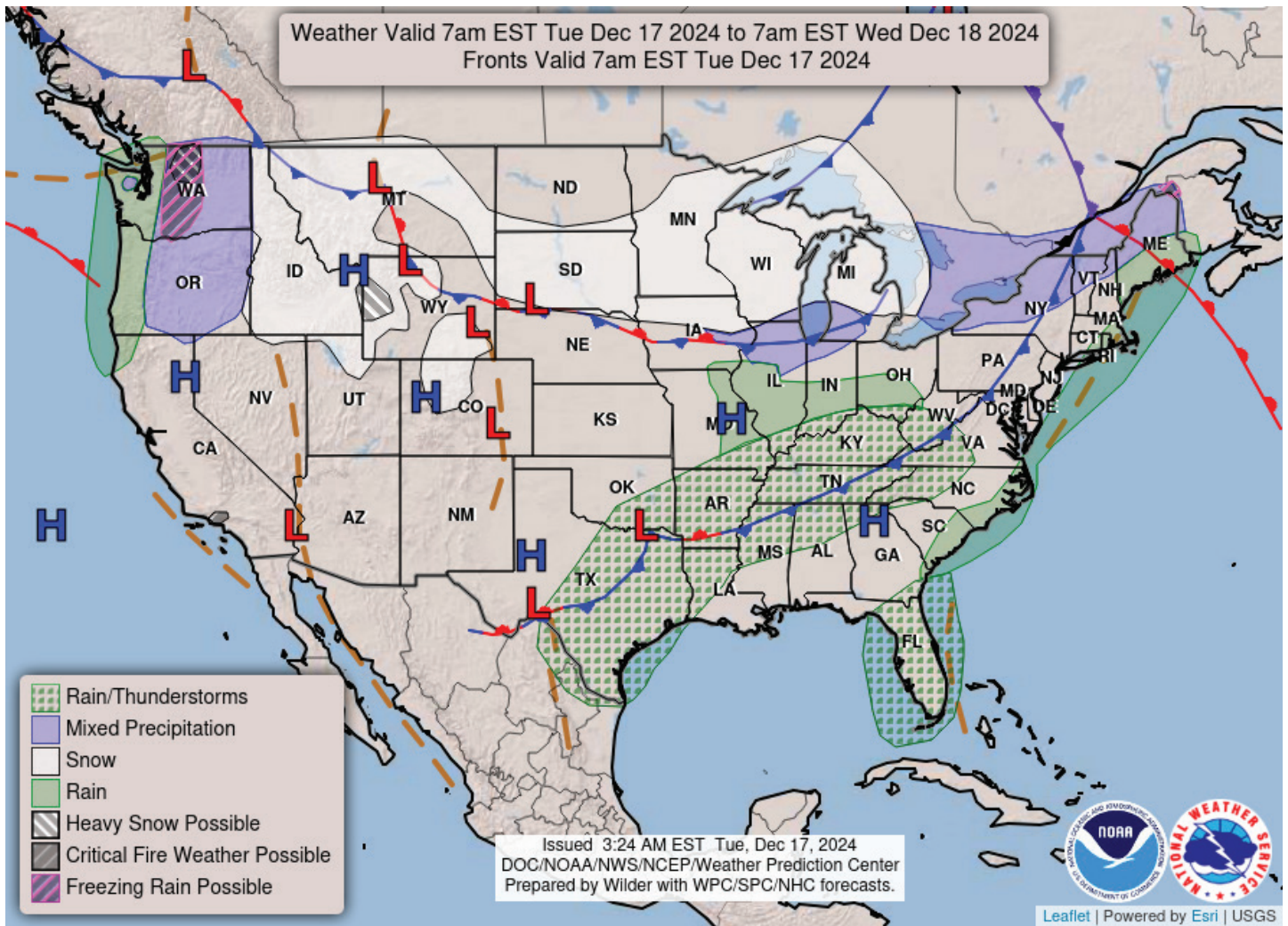
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 36 °F at 5:10 AM
Low Temp: 26 °F at 11:24 PM
Wind: 25 mph at 11:06 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1939
Record Low: -32 in 2016
Average High: 28
Average Low: 7
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.32
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.53
Precip Year to Date: 21.71
Sunset Tonight: 4:52:12 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06:07 am



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Today in Weather History

December 17, 1993: A prolonged period of snow occurred from December 15th through the 19th over the western half of South Dakota. Several accidents leading to injuries occurred due to ice on the 15th, and many vehicles slid into ditches. Snowfall amounts were 4 to 10 inches. McIntosh received three inches of snow; Timber Lake, Murdo, and Selby received five inches of snow; and six inches accumulated at McLaughlin. Eagle Butte recorded seven inches of new snow.

1884 - A three week blockade of snow began at Portland, OR. A record December total of 34 inches was received. (David Ludlum)

December 17, 1903: Wilbur and Orville Wright made four brief flights at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina with their first powered aircraft on this day. After having success with their 5-foot biplane kite, the brothers realized the weather conditions in Dayton were not ideal for their flying experiments. They wrote the Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C. requesting a list of suitable places on the east coast where winds were constant. Below is the response the Wright Brothers received from Joseph Doshier, who staffed the Weather Bureau office, wrote in August of 1900 regarding the suitability of Kitty Hawk.

"Mr. Wilbur Wright

Dayton Ohio

Dear Sir,

In reply to yours of the 3rd, I will say the beach here is about one mile wide clear of trees or high hills, and islands for nearly sixty miles south. Conditions: the wind blows mostly from the North and Northeast September and October which is nearly down this piece of land. Giving you many miles of a steady wind with a free sweep. I am sorry to say that you could not rent a house here. So you will have to bring tents. You could obtain frame.

The only way to reach Kitty Hawk is from Manteo Roanoke Island N.C. in a small sail boat. From your letter I believe you would find it here like you wish. Will be pleased at any time to give you any information. Yours very respectfully

JJ. Doshier"

On December 17, with the winds were averaging more than 20 mph, Orville took a flight that lasted 12 seconds for a total distance of 120 feet.

December 17, 1924: From the Monthly Weather Review, "a severe glaze storm occurred in west-central Illinois on December 17 and 18, the area of great destruction embracing a territory about 75 miles in width and 170 miles in length. In the affected area, trees were badly damaged, wires broken, and thousands of electric poles went down. Electric services were paralyzed, and it required weeks to restore operation and months to permanently rebuild the lines.

The street railway company and the Illinois Traction System resumed complete operation 17 days after the storm. Electric light service was completely restored January 10. The ice had practically disappeared from the trees and wires by January 4, but on January 20, there was still considerable ice on the ground.

The Western Union Telegraph Co. lost 8,000 poles and the Illinois Bell Telephone Co. about 23,000. The total damage to wire service in Illinois probably equaled or exceeded \$5,000,000." If the loss of business, the damage to trees and possible injury to winter grains, the storm may be considered one of the most disastrous of its kind in the history of Illinois."

1929 - An icestorm in western New York State resulted in much damage and hardship. A Buffalo report stated, "one was kept awake by the breaking limbs, which snapped off with a report much louder than a rifle shot." (17th-18th) (The Weather Channel)

2008 - A winter storm dumped as much as 3.6 inches of snow across Las Vegas, Nevada, prompting the closure of schools and highways. This was the largest December snowfall on record and the heaviest snowfall since January 1979 when a total of 7.5 inches fell (Associated Press).



WHO GETS THE CREDIT?

A Chinese farmer had only one son and one horse. Nothing else in life mattered to him. One night his horse ran away. His neighbors came to console him and said, "What bad luck!"

Later the horse returned and brought twelve wild horses with him. The neighbors, hearing the news, gathered at his home and rejoiced with him saying, "What good luck!"

While taming one of the wild horses, the son fell and severely broke his leg. The neighbors gathered once again and with remorse said, "What bad luck!"

Soon after this, their warlord was engaged in a battle and took all of the able-bodied men to war – except his son. None of the men returned. But the son, who was excused from going to war and was left behind, led a long and productive life.

Was it the Lord or was it luck?

Every event that occurs in our lives is open for our personal interpretation. When the mind of Christ is at work within us, we will see God at work in everything.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to realize Your presence and power in our lives and see Your hand at work. Open our eyes, minds, and hearts to see You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. Romans 8:26

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.13.24

36 43 52 58 65 16

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$740,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 19 Mins
DRAW: 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.16.24

5 17 18 34 50 8

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$17,660,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 34
DRAW: Mins 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.16.24

3 16 29 31 33 9

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 49 Mins
DRAW: 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.14.24

1 9 19 21 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$156,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 49
DRAW: Mins 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.16.24

2 7 15 21 56 12

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 18
DRAW: Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.16.24

9 30 33 57 61 17

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$69,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 18
DRAW: Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center
07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day
07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm
07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church
07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm
08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center
Cancelled: Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm
08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament
08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm
09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm
11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.
12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close
12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services, downtown Groton
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/20/2025 NSU Gypsy Day
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Arlington 49, Iroquois-Lake Preston 34
DeSmet 61, Wolsey-Wessington 29
Faulkton 38, Redfield 32
Florence-Henry 54, Waubay/Summit 40
Great Plains Lutheran 64, Tri-State, N.D. 23
Northwestern 56, Britton-Hecla 28
O'Gorman High School 52, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 24
Sioux Falls Christian 68, Pipestone, Minn. 43

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Dell Rapids 50, Baltic 38
O'Gorman High School 74, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 60
Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. 49, Wilmot 48

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Battle erupts over South Korean court that will determine the fate of impeached Yoon

By KIM TONG-HYUNG and HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's acting leader vowed Tuesday to convey to the world that things are back to normal following parliament's impeachment of conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, as rival parties squabble the appointments of court justices who will determine whether to unseat or reinstate Yoon.

The country's liberal opposition-controlled parliament voted to impeach Yoon last Saturday over his short-lived Dec. 3 martial law imposition, suspending Yoon's presidential powers until the Constitutional Court determines whether he can stay in office. If Yoon is dismissed, a national election to choose his successor must be held within two months.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who became acting leader, has taken steps to reassure the U.S. and other countries and stabilize markets. Presiding over a Cabinet Council meeting on Tuesday, Han said he will "continuously do my utmost to inform the international society that the Republic of Korea is fast regaining stability and maintaining confidence with partners."

But the country's intense political strife appears to be far from over, as rival parties began bickering over whether to fill three vacant seats at the Constitutional Court.

How many justices are needed to unseat Yoon?

To formally end Yoon's presidency, the nine-member court panel needs support from at least six justices. But since three seats remain vacant following retirements, a unanimous decision in favor of Yoon's impeachment is required to throw him out of office.

Three of the court's nine justices are directly appointed by the president. Three others are nominated by the Supreme Court head and another three by the National Assembly, before they are formally appointed by the president in what is widely considered a procedural matter. The three seats that are currently open are to be nominated by the National Assembly — two by the Democratic Party and the other by Yoon's ruling People Power Party.

The court can rule on Yoon's case with only the current six justices. But the main liberal opposition Democratic Party, which led the impeachment efforts against Yoon, has said it will speed up the process

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of restoring the court to its full capacity to promote fairness and public confidence in its ruling.

PPP floor leader Kweon Seong-dong, a Yoon loyalist, created a stir Tuesday as he voiced his objection to the push to fill the three vacancies. He said it would be inappropriate for Han, the acting leader, to appoint justices nominated by parliament, saying such authority solely rests with the president.

"An acting president can appoint Constitutional Court justices when there is a presidential vacancy, but not when the president's duties are just suspended," Kweon said.

Many observers say the court's current six-member configuration is advantageous for Yoon's chances to return to office, as it would only require a single justice rejecting the parliament's impeachment. They note that Cheong Hyung-sik, one of the six justices, is a clear conservative who was directly appointed by Yoon.

Battle over appointments exposes deep divisions

The Democratic Party quickly dismissed Kweon's argument as "absurd and utterly nonsensical" and urged PPP to abide by a November agreement between the parties to nominate the three Constitutional Court justices.

Party lawmaker and spokesperson Jo Seoung-lae said PPP has "blatantly revealed their true intention to obstruct the constitutional trial."

There was no immediate response from Han, who during the Cabinet meeting stressed that the government will cooperate with the ruling and opposition parties to stabilize the economy.

There is no clear definition about what an acting president can and cannot do over the appointments of the court's justices. But some experts say Han is allowed to appoint the three remaining justices nominated by parliament, as there's no legal provision preventing him from doing so.

Kim Jung-won, the Constitutional Court's secretary general, told the parliament on Tuesday that the court believes the acting president can exercise the right to appoint justices.

The Democratic Party accuses PPP of trying to drag out the impeachment trial at the Constitutional Court, which has up to 180 days to determine Yoon's fate.

Time is a crucial issue for Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung, who is favored by polls to win a presidential election in the event of Yoon's ouster but grapples with his own legal troubles. Lee could possibly be prohibited from running for president if the appellate and Supreme courts uphold his lower court conviction for election law violation in November.

Yoon faces allegations of rebellion and abuse of power over his martial law introduction. Investigative authorities want him to appear for questioning later this week, but officials at Yoon's office and residence on Monday refused to receive requests for his appearance.

The martial law declaration, the first of its kind in more than 40 years, drew hundreds of troops who tried to encircle parliament and prevent lawmakers from voting on the decree. Many lawmakers still managed to get inside a National Assembly chamber and voted to overturn Yoon's decree unanimously, forcing Yoon's Cabinet to lift it.

Yoon's decree, which harkened back to an era of past military-backed dictatorships, has sparked massive street protests calling for his ouster and resulted in his approval rating plummeting. Yoon's defense minister, police chief and several other senior military commanders have been arrested over their roles in the martial law enforcement.

Supporters of Yoon worry that his early exit would severely hamper the country's conservatives and cause them to likely lose a presidential by-election to the liberals, like they did in 2017, when then-impeached conservative President Park Geun-hye was ousted and arrested over a corruption scandal.

A Russian general was killed by a bomb in Moscow. Ukraine official says secret service was behind it

By The Associated Press undefined

A senior Russian general was killed Tuesday by a bomb hidden in a scooter outside his apartment building in Moscow, a day after Ukraine's security agency leveled criminal charges against him. A Ukrainian official said the country's security service carried out the attack.

Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed as he left for his office. Kirillov's assistant also died in the bombing, which was triggered remotely, according to Russian news reports. Images from the scene showed shattered windows and scorched and blackened brickwork.

Kirillov was under sanctions from several countries, including the U.K. and Canada, for his actions in Moscow's war in Ukraine. On Monday, Ukraine's Security Service, or SBU, opened a criminal investigation against him, accusing him of directing the use of banned chemical weapons.

An official with the SBU said the agency was behind the attack. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information, described Kirillov as a "war criminal and an entirely legitimate target."

The SBU has said it recorded more than 4,800 occasions when Russia used chemical weapons on the battlefield since its full-scale invasion in February 2022. In May, the U.S. State Department said in a statement that it had recorded the use of chloropicrin, a poison gas first deployed in World War I, against Ukrainian troops.

Russia has denied using any chemical weapons in Ukraine and, in turn, has accused Kyiv of using toxic agents in combat.

Kirillov, who took his current job in 2017, was one of the most high-profile figures to level those accusations. He held numerous briefings to accuse the Ukrainian military of using toxic agents and planning to launch attacks with radioactive substances — claims that Ukraine and its Western allies rejected as propaganda.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, several prominent figures have been killed in targeted attacks.

Darya Dugina, a commentator on Russian TV channels and the daughter of Kremlin-linked nationalist ideologue Alexander Dugin, died in a 2022 car bombing that investigators suspected was aimed at her father.

Vladlen Tatarsky, a popular military blogger, died in April 2023, when a statuette given to him at a party in St. Petersburg exploded. A Russian woman, who said that she presented the figurine on orders of a contact in Ukraine, was convicted in the case and handed a 27-year sentence.

In December 2023, Illia Kiva, a former pro-Moscow Ukrainian lawmaker who fled to Russia, was shot and killed near Moscow. The Ukrainian military intelligence lauded the killing, warning that other "traitors of Ukraine" would share the same fate.

On Dec. 9, an explosive device was placed under a car in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian city of Donetsk, reportedly targeting Sergei Yevsyukov, the former head of the Olenivka Prison where dozens of Ukrainian prisoners of war died in a missile strike in July 2022. One other was injured in the blast. Russian authorities said they detained a suspect in the attack.

15-year-old girl fatally shoots teacher and teenager at a Christian school in Wisconsin

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A 15-year-old student opened fire inside a study hall at a small Christian school in Wisconsin, killing a teacher and teenager and prompting a swarm of police officers responding to a second grader's 911 call.

The female student wounded six others in Monday's shooting at Abundant Life Christian School, including two students who were in critical condition, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said. A teacher and three students were taken to a hospital with less serious injuries, and two of them were later released.

"Every child, every person in that building is a victim and will be a victim forever. ... We need to figure out and try to piece together what exactly happened," Barnes said.

Police said the shooter, identified as Natalie Rupnow, was found with a self-inflicted gunshot wound when officers arrived and died en route to a hospital. Barnes declined to offer additional details about the shooter, partly out of respect for the family.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school — prekindergarten through high school — with approximately 420 students in Madison, the state capital.

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Barbara Wiers, the school's director of elementary and school relations, said when they practice safety routines, leaders always announce that it's a drill. That didn't happen Monday, just a week before Christmas break.

"When they heard, 'Lockdown, lockdown,' they knew it was real," she said.

Wiers said the school does not have metal detectors but uses other security measures including cameras. A motive for the shooting was not immediately known, nor was it clear if the victims were targeted, Barnes said.

"I don't know why, and I feel like if we did know why, we could stop these things from happening," he told reporters.

Barnes said police were talking with the shooter's father and other family members, who were cooperating, and searching the shooter's home.

"He lost someone as well," Barnes said of the shooter's father. "And so we're not going to rush the information. We'll take our time and make sure we do our due diligence."

The first 911 call to report an active shooter came in shortly before 11 a.m. First responders who were in training just 3 miles (about 5 kilometers) away dashed to the school for an actual emergency, Barnes said. They arrived three minutes after the initial call.

Investigators believe the shooter used a 9mm pistol, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the ongoing investigation.

Police blocked off roads around the school, and federal agents were at the scene to assist local law enforcement. No shots were fired by police.

Children and families were reunited at a health clinic about a mile (1.6 kilometers) from the school. Parents pressed children against their chests while others squeezed hands and shoulders as they walked side by side.

Abundant Life asked for prayers in a brief Facebook post. Wiers said they're still deciding whether they will resume classes this week.

Bethany Highman, the mother of a student, rushed to the school and learned over FaceTime that her daughter was OK.

"As soon as it happened, your world stops for a minute. Nothing else matters," Highman said. "There's nobody around you. You just bolt for the door and try to do everything you can as a parent to be with your kids."

In a statement, President Joe Biden cited the tragedy in calling on Congress to pass universal background checks, a national red flag law and certain gun restrictions.

"We can never accept senseless violence that traumatizes children, their families, and tears entire communities apart," Biden said. He spoke with Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers and Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and offered his support.

Evers said it's "unthinkable" that a child or teacher would go to school and never return home.

The school shooting was the latest among dozens across the U.S. in recent years, including especially deadly ones in Newtown, Connecticut; Parkland, Florida; and Uvalde, Texas.

The shootings have set off fervent debates about gun control and frayed the nerves of parents whose children are growing up accustomed to doing active shooter drills in their classrooms. But school shootings have done little to move the needle on national gun laws.

Firearms were the leading cause of death among children in 2020 and 2021, according to KFF, a nonprofit that researches health care issues.

Rhodes-Conway said the country needs to do more to prevent gun violence.

"I hoped that this day would never come to Madison," she said.

Middle East latest: Israeli strike in Gaza kills at least 8 from the same family, Palestinians say

By The Associated Press undefined

An Israeli strike in Gaza killed at least eight people from the same family, most of them women and children, Palestinian medics said Tuesday.

The strike late Monday hit a house in Gaza City's central neighborhood of Daraj, according to the Health Ministry's ambulance and emergency service.

Among the bodies recovered from the rubble were a father and his three children, and the children's grandmother, according to a casualty list obtained by The Associated Press. There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the strike.

Israeli bombardment and offensives in Gaza have killed more than 45,000 Palestinians over the past 14 months, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The ministry's tally does not distinguish between combatants and civilians, but it says more than half the dead were women and children.

Israel launched its campaign in retaliation for Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel in which militants killed some 1,200 people and abducted 250 others, around 100 of whom remain in captivity.

Here's the latest:

British diplomats meet leader of militant group that toppled Assad

LONDON — British diplomats have met the leader of the militant group that toppled Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

Photographs posted by the group on social media showed senior officials, including the U.K. special representative for Syria, Ann Snow, meeting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Mohammed al-Golani, in Damascus on Monday.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy confirmed Monday that Britain had sent "a delegation of senior U.K. officials to Damascus this week for meetings with the new Syrian authorities and members of civil society groups."

Britain, along with the U.S. and other countries, classifies HTS, a former al-Qaida affiliate, as a terrorist organization. U.K. officials have suggested they may reconsider that designation, but have not given a timeline. They say British officials can still talk to HST in the meantime.

In an interview with the Times of London newspaper, Al-Sharaa urged the West to lift sanctions and said Israel should stop its strikes on Syria.

"We do not want any conflict whether with Israel or anyone else and we will not let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks," he was quoted as saying. "The Syrian people need a break, and the strikes must end and Israel has to pull back to its previous positions."

An Israeli strike in Gaza kills at least 8 from same family, Palestinians say

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — An Israeli strike in Gaza killed at least eight people from the same family, most of them women and children, Palestinian medics said Tuesday.

The strike late Monday hit a house in Gaza City's central neighborhood of Daraj, according to the Health Ministry's ambulance and emergency service.

Rescuers recovered the bodies of eight people including two women and four children from under the rubble, it said. Among the dead were a father and his three children, and the children's grandmother, according to a casualty list obtained by The Associated Press.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the strike.

German diplomats will hold their first talks with the new Syrian government

BERLIN — Germany says its diplomats will hold their first talks on Tuesday with the new Syrian government installed by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS.

The Foreign Ministry in Berlin said the talks will center on an "inclusive transition process" in Syria and the protection of minorities. The German delegation also plans to sound out the possibility of a German diplomatic presence in Damascus, and will meet representatives of Christian communities among others.

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The ministry said in a statement that “we know where HTS comes from and know its origins in al-Qaida ideology,” and said that Germany is watching the activities of the group and the interim government closely.

“As far as can be said at all at this point, they are acting prudently so far,” it added. “Like our international partners, we will measure them by their actions. Any cooperation requires that ethnic and religious minorities be protected and women’s rights respected.”

The U.S. has already said that its officials have been in direct contact with HTS.

Germany has been a leading destination for Syrian refugees over the past decade.

Mediation efforts in northern Syria fail to reach a permanent truce, US-backed force says

DAMASCUS, Syria — A U.S.-backed force in Syria says U.S.-led mediation efforts have failed to reach a permanent truce in Syria’s north between the force’s fighters and Turkish-backed gunmen.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said the failure to end the fighting in the northern areas of Manbij and Kobani were unsuccessful due to Turkey’s unwillingness to accept key points.

“Despite U.S. efforts to stop the war, Turkey and its mercenary militias have continued to escalate over the last period,” the SDF said.

The failure of the mediation is expected to lead to a new round of fighting between the SDF and the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army in the areas of Kobani.

US military says it bombed a Houthi military facility in Yemen’s capital

CAIRO — The U.S. military on Tuesday said it bombed a Houthi military facility in Yemen’s capital, Sanaa, the latest U.S.-led attack on the Iranian-backed rebels.

The Houthi media office said the strike hit part of the sprawling complex that houses the rebels’ Defense Ministry. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

U.S. Central Command said the strike late Monday targeted a key command and control facility that was “a hub for coordinating Houthi operations,” including attacks on U.S. Navy and merchant vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

Houthis have targeted dozens of merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza started in October last year. They have seized one vessel and sunk two in the campaign, which has killed four sailors.

The rebels have maintained that they target ships linked to Israel, the U.S. or the United Kingdom to force an end to Israel’s campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran.

Monday’s U.S. strike came hours after the Houthis said they fired a hypersonic ballistic missile toward Israel. The Houthi missile triggered sirens across the Tel Aviv metropolitan area.

The Israeli military said it intercepted the missile outside Israel’s borders. However, shrapnel that the military said was likely from an Israeli interceptor missile fell on the roof of a home in east Jerusalem.

Magnitude 7.3 earthquake causes widespread damage in Pacific island nation of Vanuatu

By CHARLOTTE GRAHAM-McLAY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — A powerful magnitude 7.3 earthquake struck just off the coast of Vanuatu on Tuesday, causing widespread destruction in the South Pacific island nation as the injured began arriving at a hospital and unconfirmed reports of casualties emerged.

A tsunami warning was called off less than two hours after the quake. With communications still down hours later and official information scarce, witness accounts of casualties began to surface on social media and through patchy phone calls.

The earthquake occurred at a depth of 57 kilometers (35 miles) and was centered 30 kilometers (18 miles) west of Port Vila, the largest city in Vanuatu, a group of 80 islands that is home to about 330,000 people. The jolt was followed by a magnitude 5.5 aftershock near the same location and the shudders continued throughout the afternoon and evening local time.

It was not immediately clear how much damage was caused as phone lines and government websites

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remained down. In first official information published on social media hours after the quake, the Geohazards Department said its monitoring systems were offline due to power outages.

Residents were urged to stay away from coastlines for at least 24 hours — and until tsunami and earthquake monitoring systems were operational once again. No confirmed reports of damage or casualties were provided but accounts detailing widespread destruction filtered out on social media and in interviews.

Dan McGarry, a journalist based in Port Vila, told The Associated Press he heard of one death in the quake from a police officer outside Vila Central Hospital. McGarry saw three people on gurneys “in obvious distress,” he said.

Doctors were working “as fast as they could” at a triage center outside the emergency ward, he added. But the nation is not equipped for a mass casualty event, McGarry said.

Video shared by the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation showed crowds outside the hospital. Phone numbers for the police, the hospital and other public agencies did not connect.

Accounts of people trapped inside collapsed buildings could also not immediately be verified. A video posted on social media appeared to show crumpled buildings in Port Vila, including one that had collapsed onto cars. A Red Cross spokesperson in Fiji said the head of the aid agency’s Vanuatu office had reported widespread damage before communications were cut off.

A building housing a number of diplomatic missions in Port Vila — including those of the United States, Britain, France and New Zealand — was significantly damaged, New Zealand’s Foreign Ministry said. Officials were in the process of accounting for New Zealand High Commission staff, a spokesperson said.

The U.S. Embassy’s Facebook page said its office was closed until further notice.

A video posted to social media showed the building with some damage to its structure, including buckled windows and debris that had crumbled from walls to the ground. Other photos and videos showed items and shelves that had tumbled to the floors of shops and landslides that appeared to block some roads.

Katie Greenwood, the Fiji-based head of the Asia-Pacific regional office for the Red Cross, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. that the downtown area of Port Vila was full of large buildings and hotels.

“We haven’t heard at the moment about any casualties, but I will be shocked if we don’t hear that bad news coming through from Port Vila at some point,” she said.

McGarry said a “massive landslide” at the international shipping terminal was likely to impede the country’s recovery. The airport’s runway is also damaged, he said.

Vanuatu’s position on a subduction zone — where the Indo-Australia tectonic plate moves beneath the Pacific Plate — means earthquakes of greater than magnitude 6 are not uncommon and the country’s buildings are intended to withstand quake damage.

“I think it could have been worse,” McGarry said. But this was the most serious he had experienced during 21 years in Vanuatu “by a long shot,” he said.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong told reporters that Australian High Commission staff were safe.

“We will provide whatever assistance is required,” she said. “I say to the people of Vanuatu, you are family and Australia is here to help.”

New Zealand’s Foreign Minister Winston Peters said 45 New Zealanders were registered as being in Vanuatu. Peters said his government was “deeply concerned” about the situation there.

Australian state proposes ban on protests at places of worship to fight rising antisemitism

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — An Australian state government on Tuesday proposed new restrictions on protesters in response to rising antisemitism, including a ban on demonstrations outside places of worship.

Victoria Premier Jacinta Allan proposed the new laws after arsonists damaged a Melbourne synagogue this month and protestors kept fearful worshippers trapped inside a Sydney synagogue for three hours a week earlier.

“That’s not peaceful protest. It’s menacing behavior,” Allan said.

"Antisemitism is a cancer and we must leave no stone unturned to fight the evil of antisemitism, to fight the evil of this racism in all of its forms and also to continue to work to help heal our multicultural community, to help build on that social cohesion and continue to support our strong, united Victoria," she added.

The new laws would protect the right of people to "gather and pray free from fear, harassment and intimidation," her office said in a statement.

The proposed laws, which will be voted on by the state legislature early next year, would establish safe access areas around places of worship and prohibit disturbances of religious gatherings.

The laws would also ban protesters flying flags and displaying symbols of groups listed by Australia as terrorist organizations. Face masks used by protesters to conceal their identities and protect against cap-sicum spray would also be banned.

Anti-Defamation Commission chair Dvir Abramovich, a leading opponent of antisemitism in Australia, welcomed the proposed law.

"Today, the Victorian government has declared war on hate and antisemitism — and it's about time," Abramovich said in a statement.

"Victoria has drawn a line in the sand and sent a thunderous message to the hate-mongers, the graffiti cowards, the firebombers, and the social media trolls: Your days of terrorizing our communities are over," he added.

The arson attack on Adass Israel Synagogue on Dec. 6 marked an escalation in targeted assaults in Australia since the war between Israel and the militant Hamas group started over a year ago in the Gaza Strip.

Authorities have declared it a terrorist act, which increases resources available to investigators.

A federal law passed in January banned the Nazi salute and the public display of Nazi symbols in response to growing antisemitism, and the government appointed special envoys this year to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Australia is an increasingly multicultural society. The latest census in 2021 found that Australians born overseas or with a parent born overseas formed a majority for the first time.

Younger Asian Americans navigate something new to their generation: Taking up space

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Client after client comes through the 12 Pell barbershop in Manhattan's Chinatown. They come for the cuts, and for the cool.

On 12 Pell's lively social media accounts, the young, predominantly Asian American barbers don't hesitate to offer advice to teens and men of all ages and ethnicities with humor, quips, and confidence.

Karho Leung, 34, a son of Chinatown and a 12 Pell co-founder, wanted to start a business that reflected him and his desire for "building the world that I want to live in ... not asking for permission."

About as American as it gets, right? The hunger to find your own way, make your voice heard? A look at social media and pop culture shows Leung and plenty of other Asian Americans of his and younger generations doing just that.

But that American reality hasn't always belonged to everyone, including previous generations of Asian Americans. That American notion of having the freedom to stake out your own space? Sometimes, often-times, that has meant less space for others.

Earlier generations of Asian Americans, some of whom have been here for well over a century and others whose roots trace to recent decades, have lived in Americas where their immigrant-origin communities were smaller and regarded as foreign, and where there was little mainstream familiarity with the countries they traced their ancestries to. And there was no Internet or social media culture that encouraged people to define their own lives.

Instead, there were stereotypes that persist to this day — of otherness, of broken-English speaking and passiveness, at times sneaky or suspicious, or nerds and geeks.

But even as those stereotypes still do harm, they don't have the same power in a time when many

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Americans eat from a global plate; where yoga studios and henna tattoos, temples and cultural festivals are everywhere, and the size, variety and geography of Asian American communities have increased dramatically in recent decades even as they remain a small part of the overall whole.

Those stereotypes don't touch Leung the same way they impacted generations before him.

"It's funny because even though I watched this type of stereotype and portrayal happen growing up, it never really resonated or hit me that that was what I was up against," he says.

Jeff Yang, 56, a writer who has spent decades chronicling Asian American communities and culture, laughs when asked if the cultural space that Leung inhabits and makes his own sounds like the world of Yang's childhood.

"I grew up in a world where I felt like everything about me was projected on me by other people," Yang says. "The stories that were being told were all told by non-Asians about what I could do, who I could be, what I could look like."

It's not as if that world doesn't still exist. Simran Anand, 27, was still part of just one of three South Asian families in Reading, Pennsylvania, in the 2000s. She can relate, she says, to the sense earlier generations had of feeling culturally isolated in her day-to-day life when she stepped out of the family home.

But she had something they lacked — large-scale South Asian communities in nearby places to visit and interact with.

For her, it's both-and, not either-or, a sensibility she takes to her jewelry company, BySimran, which drew inspiration from South Asian designs but also adapted to fit her sensibilities as a young American woman.

"I am American, but I'm also South Asian," she says. "And I don't have to be one or the other."

Demetri Manabat, 23, agrees. Born and raised in Las Vegas to a Filipino father and Mexican mother, the spoken word artist says "it sounds like a different world" to hear about his parents' experiences growing up.

His parents didn't teach him or his brothers Tagalog, one of the languages of the Philippines, or Spanish because "they grew up in a time where that was kind of frowned upon to be speaking a different language. And so they were under the assumption that that kind of perception would continue throughout my years, which it didn't," Manabat says.

Alex Paik remembers what it was like. The 43-year-old Korean American artist grew up in a predominantly white suburb outside of Philadelphia. "When I was growing up, it was like I either was not Korean enough or too Korean," he says.

Today, he's intrigued watching his 11-year-old daughter. "She loves to read, and there's so many stories now that are written by Asian American women that center Asian and Asian American girls as protagonists," he says. "I don't know how it would affect your sense of self, but it must affect it somehow, so I'm really curious to see how she grows up ... It's just normal for her."

Factors that have made a difference in the lives of Asian Americans over time include the baseline demographic reality that there are more, and bigger, communities across the country largely due to the 1965 reform of immigration laws. Globalization has played a hand as well, introducing cultures to each other as the world has gotten smaller. And of course, the internet and technology.

Paik thinks some of what he's seeing now is also the natural outpouring that comes from a connection to the country that looks different to those born here than it does for those who have immigrated here.

"When you start with the assumption that you belong in a space, I feel like that changes how you approach things," he says. "Whether or not that space actually wants you is kind of beside the point. There's an attitude you carry, like, yeah, of course this is my house, this is my country. I grew up here."

And "I grew up here" — is the operative engine as new generations of Asian Americans rise and claim their own space — even if the assumptions they make about what's possible for them could be a bit unsettling for other generations.

"Previous generations, of course, they're going to have that kind of like 'what is going on' moment," Manabat says. "I do think that is the goal, to kind of have that moment of 'This is insane,' but it's everything that you kind of hoped would happen."

In short: building the world they want to live in. And not asking for permission.

Teacher and a teenage student killed in a shooting at a Christian school in Wisconsin

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A 15-year-old student killed a teacher and another teenager with a handgun Monday at a Christian school in Wisconsin, terrifying classmates including a second grader who made the 911 call that sent dozens of police officers rushing to the small school just a week before its Christmas break.

The female student, who was identified at a press conference Monday night, also wounded six others at a study hall at Abundant Life Christian School, including two students who were in critical condition, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said. A teacher and three students had been taken to a hospital with less serious injuries, and two of them had been released by Monday evening.

"Every child, every person in that building is a victim and will be a victim forever. ... We need to figure out and try to piece together what exactly happened," Barnes said.

Barbara Wiers, director of elementary and school relations for Abundant Life Christian School, said students "handled themselves magnificently."

She said when the school practices safety routines, which it had done just before the school year, leaders always announce that it is a drill. That didn't happen Monday.

"When they heard, 'Lockdown, lockdown,' they knew it was real," she said.

Police said the shooter, identified as Natalie Rupnow, was found with a self-inflicted gunshot wound when officers arrived and died en route to a hospital. Barnes declined to offer additional details about the shooter, partly out of respect for the family.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school — prekindergarten through high school — with approximately 420 students in Madison, the state capital.

Wiers said the school does not have metal detectors but uses other security measures including cameras.

Children and families were reunited at a health clinic about a mile away. Parents pressed children against their chests while others squeezed hands and shoulders as they walked side by side. One girl was comforted with an adult-size coat around her shoulders as she moved to a parking lot teeming with police vehicles.

A motive for the shooting was not immediately known, nor was it clear if the victims were targeted, Barnes said.

"I don't know why, and I feel like if we did know why, we could stop these things from happening," he told reporters.

Barnes said police were talking with the shooter's father and other family members, who were cooperating, and searching the shooter's home.

"He lost someone as well," Barnes said of the shooter's father. "And so we're not going to rush the information. We'll take our time and make sure we do our due diligence."

The first 911 call to report an active shooter came in shortly before 11 a.m. First responders who were in training just 3 miles (5 kilometers) away dashed to the school for an actual emergency, Barnes said. They arrived 3 minutes after the initial call and went into the building immediately.

Classes had been taking place when the shooting happened, Barnes said.

Investigators believe the shooter used a 9mm pistol, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the ongoing investigation.

Police blocked off roads around the school, and federal agents were at the scene to assist local law enforcement. No shots were fired by police.

Abundant Life asked for prayers in a brief Facebook post.

Wiers said the school's goal is to have staff get together early in the week and have community opportunities for students to reconnect before the winter break, but it's still to be decided whether they will resume classes this week.

Bethany Highman, the mother of a student, rushed to the school and learned over FaceTime that her daughter was OK.

"As soon as it happened, your world stops for a minute. Nothing else matters," Highman said. "There's nobody around you. You just bolt for the door and try to do everything you can as a parent to be with your kids."

In a statement, President Joe Biden cited the tragedy in calling on Congress to pass universal background checks, a national red flag law and certain gun restrictions.

"We can never accept senseless violence that traumatizes children, their families, and tears entire communities apart," Biden said. He spoke with Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers and Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and offered his support.

Evers said it's "unthinkable" that a child or teacher would go to school and never return home.

The school shooting was the latest among dozens across the U.S. in recent years, including especially deadly ones in Newtown, Connecticut; Parkland, Florida; and Uvalde, Texas.

The shootings have set off fervent debates about gun control and frayed the nerves of parents whose children are growing up accustomed to doing active shooter drills in their classrooms. But school shootings have done little to move the needle on national gun laws.

Firearms were the leading cause of death among children in 2020 and 2021, according to KFF, a nonprofit that researches health care issues.

Rhodes-Conway said the country needs to do more to prevent gun violence.

"I hoped that this day would never come to Madison," she said.

Canada's finance minister resigns as unpopular Trudeau faces biggest test of his political career

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau faced the biggest test of his political career after Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, long one of his most powerful and loyal ministers, resigned from the Cabinet on Monday.

The stunning move raised questions about how much longer the prime minister of nearly 10 years — whose popularity has plummeted due to concerns about inflation and immigration — can stay on as his administration scrambles to deal with incoming U.S. President-elect Donald Trump.

"The Great State of Canada is stunned as the Finance Minister resigns, or was fired, from her position by Governor Justin Trudeau," Trump posted on Truth Social. "Her behavior was totally toxic, and not at all conducive to making deals which are good for the very unhappy citizens of Canada. She will not be missed!!!"

Trump previously trolled Trudeau by calling Canada a state. And during his first term in his office — when he renegotiated the free trade deal with Canada and Mexico — Trump said Freeland wasn't liked.

Trudeau swiftly named longtime ally and close friend Dominic LeBlanc, the public safety minister who recently joined him at dinner with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, to replace Freeland. Freeland did not make that trip.

After being sworn in, LeBlanc told reporters he and Trudeau are focused on the cost of living facing Canadians and on finding common ground with Trump on border security and economic issues.

"It's not been an easy day," Trudeau later told a room of party supporters. He called it one of his party's "toughest days" but he did not say what he planned to do.

Trudeau faces calls to resign

Jagmeet Singh, leader of the opposition New Democratic Party which Trudeau's ruling Liberals have relied upon to stay in power, called for him to resign earlier Monday.

"He has to go," NDP leader Singh said.

The main opposition Conservatives have not called for Trudeau's resignation but demand an election.

But a no confidence vote in the government is not imminent with Parliament about to break for the holidays .

Freeland, who was also deputy prime minister, said Trudeau had told her on Friday he no longer wanted

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her to serve as finance minister and offered her another role in the Cabinet. But she said in her resignation letter that the only "honest and viable path" was to leave the Cabinet.

"For the past number of weeks, you and I have found ourselves at odds about the best path forward for Canada," Freeland said.

Freeland warns against 'costly political gimmicks'

Freeland and Trudeau disagreed about a two-month sales tax holiday and 250 Canadian dollar (\$175) checks to Canadians that were recently announced. Freeland said Canada is dealing with Trump's threat to impose sweeping 25% tariffs and should eschew "costly political gimmicks" it can "ill afford."

"Our country is facing a grave challenge," Freeland said in her letter. "That means keeping our fiscal powder dry today, so we have the reserves we may need for a coming tariff war."

A Liberal party official said Freeland was offered a position as minister in charge of Canada-U.S. relations without portfolio and without a department. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of not being authorized to speak publicly on the matter, said the position would have been in name only and wouldn't have come with any of the tools Freeland previously had when she negotiated the trade with the United States.

Freeland, who chaired a Cabinet committee on U.S. relations, had been set to deliver the fall economic statement and likely announce border security measures designed to help Canada avoid Trump's tariffs. Trump has threatened to impose a 25% tax on all products entering the U.S. from Canada and Mexico unless the neighbors stem the numbers of migrants and drugs.

The statement shows a much larger deficit than expected for the fiscal year and more than a billion for border security.

Can Trudeau survive?

Trudeau has said he plans on leading the Liberal Party into the next election, but many party members have said they don't want him to run for a fourth term, and Freeland's departure was a huge blow.

Trudeau met with his lawmakers on Monday evening. Later, most of them brushed past reporters, declining to say what was said in the meeting.

Liberal lawmaker Chad Collins said they were "not united."

"There's still a number of our members that want a change in leadership. I'm one of them," he said. "I think the only path forward for us is to choose a new leader."

No Canadian prime minister in more than a century has won four straight terms.

The federal election has to be held before October. The Liberals must rely on the support of at least one other major party in Parliament, because they don't hold an outright majority themselves. If NDP pulls support, an election can be held at any time.

Singh said all options are on the table.

Trudeau channeled his father's popularity

Trudeau channeled the star power of his father, late Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, in 2015, when he reasserted the country's liberal identity after almost a decade of Conservative Party rule.

But Canadians are now frustrated by the rising cost of living and other issues, including immigration increases following the country's emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Justin Trudeau's legacy includes opening the doors wide to immigration. He also legalized cannabis and brought in a carbon tax intended to fight climate change.

Freeland also said in her letter that Canadians "know when we are working for them, and they equally know when we are focused on ourselves. Inevitably, our time in government will come to an end."

Trudeau tries to bring in another Cabinet member

Separately, Trudeau has been trying to recruit Mark Carney, the former head of the Bank of England and Bank of Canada, to join his government. Carney has long been interested in entering politics and becoming the leader of the Liberal Party. LeBlanc's appointment to finance suggests that won't happen.

Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal, called Freeland's resignation a political earthquake.

"This is clearly a minority government on life support but, until now, the (opposition) NDP has rejected

calls to pull the plug on it," Béland said. "It's hard to know whether this resignation will force the NDP to rethink its strategy."

Things to know about the shooting at a Christian school in Wisconsin

By The Associated Press undefined

Two people were killed and others were injured Monday in a shooting at a private Christian school in Madison, Wisconsin. The shooting happened days before the Christmas break. Police said a student who opened fire, identified as a 15-year-old girl, was also dead.

Here are some things to know about the shooting in Wisconsin's capital city:

What happened in Madison?

The shooting occurred late Monday morning at Abundant Life Christian School. Police said Monday night that a second-grade student called 911 to report the shooting.

Police Chief Shon Barnes said Natalie Rupnow, who went by the name Samantha, opened fire during a study hall, killing another student and a teacher, and wounding six others.

The teacher and student were pronounced dead at the scene, he said. Their names have not yet been released. Two students who were hurt remained in critical condition Monday night, police said. A teacher and three students were taken to a hospital with less serious injuries, and two of them had been released by Monday evening.

Rupnow also died, likely by suicide, Barnes said. Responding police officers did not fire their weapons, he said. A law enforcement official previously said the shooter was 17 but police said Monday night the shooter was 15.

Investigators believe the shooter used a 9mm pistol, a law enforcement official told AP. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the ongoing investigation.

The school website shows that Friday was to be the last scheduled day of classes before the holiday break.

President Joe Biden, in a statement, called the shooting "shocking and unconscionable," and urged Congress to act immediately.

"From Newtown to Uvalde, Parkland to Madison, to so many other shootings that don't receive attention -- it is unacceptable that we are unable to protect our children from this scourge of gun violence," Biden said. "We cannot continue to accept it as normal. Every child deserves to feel safe in their classroom. Students across our country should be learning how to read and write -- not having to learn how to duck and cover."

Nine public schools in Madison were locked down for a few hours after the shooting as a precaution.

What is known about the school?

Abundant Life Christian School is nondenominational and has about 420 students from pre-kindergarten through high school, according to Barbara Wiers, director of elementary and school relations for Abundant Life Christian School.

She said at a news briefing Monday afternoon that the school does not have metal detectors but uses other security measures including cameras. She also said guns are not allowed on campus and that the school regularly practices safety routines.

"When they heard 'lockdown, lockdown,' they knew it was real," she said.

Wiers said just before the school year, they had done a retraining with the Madison Police Department, so it was "very fresh for faculty."

The school asked for prayers in a post on its Facebook page on Monday.

"Prayers Requested! Today, we had an active shooter incident at ALCS," the post said. "We are in the midst of following up. We will share information as we are able. Please pray for our Challenger Family."

The school's website said it was founded in 1978 "to offer students academic excellence in a Christ-focused context." The website said the school is accredited through the Association of Christian Schools

International.

Have religious schools been targeted elsewhere?

The shooting comes less than two weeks after a gunman critically wounded two kindergartners at a tiny religious school in Northern California and then killed himself. Butte County Sheriff Kory L. Honea said Glenn Litton was mentally ill and believed that by targeting children on Dec. 4 that he was carrying out “counter-measures” in response to America’s involvement in Middle East violence.

Litton, 56, gained entry to the Feather River School of Seventh-Day Adventists in Oroville,, California, by pretending he wanted to enroll a fictitious grandson, Honea said. He used a handgun to shoot and critically wound two kindergarten boys, ages 5 and 6. Authorities said Litton was found dead afterward just yards (meters) from the school’s playground.

It was unclear why Feather River School was targeted.

How many school shootings have happened this year?

The website for the anti-violence organization Everytown for Gun Safety shows that there have been at least 202 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, resulting in 56 deaths and 147 injuries, in 2024. That data doesn’t include the latest shooting in Madison.

The deadliest school shooting in 2024 happened in September at Apalachee High School in Georgia. Authorities said 14-year-old student Colt Gray opened fire with a semiautomatic assault-style rifle. Four people were killed and nine more were hurt, seven of them shot. A grand jury subsequently indicted Gray and his father Colin Gray — who was accused of giving his son access to the gun — on murder and other charges. Both have pleaded not guilty.

Last year, 45 people died in 158 school shootings, the Everytown for Gun Safety website shows. Sixty-seven people died in 181 school shootings in 2022, according to the data.

School shootings in recent years, including deadly ones in Newtown, Connecticut, Parkland, Florida, and Uvalde, Texas, have set off fervent debates about gun control and frayed the nerves of parents whose children are growing up accustomed to doing active shooter drills in their classrooms. But school shootings have done little to move the needle on national gun laws.

Firearms were the leading cause of death among children in 2020 and 2021, according to KFF, a nonprofit that researches health care issues

Death toll in Gaza from the Israel-Hamas war tops 45,000 Palestinians, health officials say

By WAFAA SHURAFU and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — More than 45,000 Palestinians have now been killed in the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas militants, health officials in the embattled territory said Monday, as often-stalled ceasefire negotiations appeared to be gaining ground.

Qatar, Egypt and the United States have renewed efforts to broker a ceasefire deal in recent days, and Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said Monday he believed negotiators are closer to a deal than at any time since the only previous truce, a week-long pause in November 2023 that saw 105 hostages released.

“We all estimate that an opportunity is being created following Hamas’s need to become more flexible, and I really hope we can advance to a practical stage in this process,” Katz said ahead of a closed-door session of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

Israel and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, a key Hamas ally, agreed to a ceasefire late last month.

Palestinian health officials updated the Gaza death toll to 45,028. They said 106,962 others have been wounded since the war began, and warned that the true toll is higher because thousands of bodies are buried under rubble or in areas that medics cannot access.

The ministry’s count does not distinguish between civilians and combatants, but it has said more than half of the fatalities are women and children. The Israeli military says it has killed more than 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

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The war is by far the deadliest round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, with the death toll amounting to roughly 2% of Gaza's prewar population of about 2.3 million.

A family dies as another airstrike hits a shelter

More than 50 dead were brought to hospitals across the bombed-out territory over the past 24 hours, Gaza's Health Ministry said.

Among the latest killed were 10 people, including a family of four, in an overnight Israeli strike in Gaza City's eastern Shijaiyah neighborhood, Palestinian medics said.

Israel claims Hamas is responsible for the civilian death toll because it operates from within civilian areas in the densely populated Gaza Strip. Rights groups and Palestinians say Israel has failed to take sufficient precautions to avoid civilian deaths.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting another 250. Israel responded by heavy bombardment and a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third believed to be dead. Most of the rest were released during a ceasefire last year.

A separate strike on a school on Sunday in the southern city of Khan Younis killed at least 13 people, including six children and two women, according to Nasser Hospital, where the bodies were taken. The hospital initially reported the strike had killed 16 but later said three bodies had been from a separate strike.

Louise Wateridge, a spokeswoman for the United Nations relief agency for Palestinians, said she met with children injured in Sunday's strike. They included a 17-year-old girl with a severe leg injury and shrapnel wounds.

She survived along with her twin sister and three other sisters, Wateridge said, but their mother was killed. Wateridge said one sister described "how their mother's bones were crushed under the rubble. There was nothing they could do to save her."

The Israeli military said it had struck Hamas fighters operating inside a command center embedded in a compound that had served as a school in Khan Younis. It did not provide evidence.

A Palestinian journalist is mourned

In central Gaza's Nuseirat urban refugee camp, mourners gathered for the funeral of a Palestinian journalist working for the Qatari-based Al Jazeera TV network who was killed Sunday in a strike that hit Gaza's civil defense agency. They carried his body through the streets, along with his bulletproof vest.

Al Jazeera said Ahmad Baker Al-Louh, 39, had been covering rescue operations of a family wounded in an earlier bombing when he was killed.

The strike also killed three civil defense workers, including the local head of the agency, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. The civil defense is Gaza's main rescue agency and operates under the Hamas-run government.

The International Federation of Journalists said last week that 104 journalists and media workers have been killed in 2024, with more than half dying in Gaza.

The Israeli military said its strike targeted Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants in a command center embedded in the offices of the "Civil Defense" organization. It accused the journalist of having been a member of Islamic Jihad, which his colleagues in Gaza denied.

Gaza's civil defense rejected the claims that militants operated from the site.

"We were stunned by the Israeli occupation statement," Mahmoud al-Lawh, the journalist's cousin, told The Associated Press. "These claims are lies and misleading to cover up this crime."

Former TV host Carlos Watson gets nearly 10 years in prison in case about failed startup Ozy Media

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former talk show host Carlos Watson was sentenced Monday to nearly 10 years in prison in a federal financial conspiracy case that cast his once-buzzy Ozy Media as an extreme of fake-it-'til-you-make-it startup culture.

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In one example, another Ozy executive impersonated a YouTube executive to hype Ozy to investment bankers — while Watson coached him, prosecutors said.

Watson, 55, and the now-defunct company were found guilty last summer of charges including wire fraud conspiracy. He has denied the allegations and plans to appeal.

"I loved what we built with Ozy," he said in court Monday, initially addressing supporters in the audience before the judge suggested he turn around. Watson told the judge he was a target of "selective prosecution" as a Black entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, where African American executives have been disproportionately few, and he called the case "a modern lynching."

"I made mistakes. I'm very, very sorry that people are hurt, myself included," he said, but "I don't think it's fair."

Watson, who faced a mandatory minimum sentence of two years in prison and potentially as much as 37 years, remains free for now on \$3 million bond. He is to surrender to prison March 28. Any restitution will be determined after a hearing in February.

U.S. District Judge Eric Komitee said Monday that the "quantum of dishonesty in this case is exceptional."

"Your internal apparatus for separating truth from fiction became badly miscalibrated," he told Watson in sentencing him.

Prosecutors accused the former cable news commentator and host of playing a leading role in a scheme to deceive Ozy investors and lenders by inflating revenue numbers, touting deals and offers that were nonexistent or not finalized, and flashing other false indications of Ozy's success.

Watson even listened in and texted talking points while his co-founder posed as a YouTube executive to praise Ozy on a phone call with potential investors, prosecutors said.

"His incessant and deliberate lies demonstrated not only a brazen disregard for the rule of law, but also a contempt for the values of honesty and fairness that should underlie American entrepreneurship," Brooklyn-based U.S. Attorney Breon Peace said in a statement Monday. His office prosecuted the case.

During the trial, Watson's defense blamed any misrepresentations on others, particularly co-founder Samir Rao and former Ozy chief of staff Suzee Han. She and Rao pleaded guilty, are awaiting sentencing and testified against Watson.

Watson portrayed himself Monday as a founder who put everything he had into his company, saying that he took an average salary of around \$51,000 from Ozy in its final years, has triple-mortgaged his home and drives a 15-year-old car.

After court, he questioned why Brooklyn-based federal prosecutors had gone after a California-based company and founder. Prosecutors declined to comment; the indictment alleged that scheming happened in the Brooklyn-based jurisdiction and elsewhere.

"I do think this is an attack on Black excellence," Watson said after noting that his sentence wasn't far from the 11-year term meted out to Elizabeth Holmes. She's the white former Silicon Valley CEO convicted of duping investors in the Theranos blood-testing device hoax; she has appealed.

There's no parallel between unreliable blood test technology and Ozy's roster of real programs and events, Watson said.

Ozy, founded in 2012, was styled as a hub of news and culture for millennials with a global outlook.

Watson boasted an impressive resume: degrees from Harvard University and Stanford Law School, a stint on Wall Street, on-air gigs at CNN and MSNBC, and entrepreneurial chops. Ozy Media was his second startup, coming a decade after he sold a test-prep company that he had founded while in his 20s.

Mountain View, California-based Ozy produced TV shows, newsletters, podcasts, and a music-and-ideas festival. Watson hosted several of the TV programs, including the Emmy-winning "Black Women OWN the Conversation," which appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Network.

Ozy snagged big advertisers, clients and grants. But beneath the outward signs of success was an overextended company that struggled — and disassembled — to stay afloat after 2017, according to insiders' testimony.

The company strained to make payroll, ran late on rent and took out pricey cash advances to pay bills, former finance vice president Janeen Poutre told jurors. Meanwhile, Ozy gave prospective investors much

bigger revenue numbers than those it reported to accountants, according to testimony and documents. On the witness stand in July, Watson said the company's cash squeezes were just a startup norm and its investors knew they were getting unaudited numbers that could change.

The only investor who spoke at the sentencing was Beverly Watson, who stands by her brother. She told the court Monday that her biggest loss was "this important platform that elevated people and ideas that weren't being heard before."

Ozy disintegrated in 2021, after a New York Times column disclosed the phone-call impersonation gambit and raised questions about the true size of the startup's audience.

Judge rejects Trump's bid to toss hush money conviction because of Supreme Court immunity ruling

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, JAKE OFFENHARTZ and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge Monday refused to throw out President-elect Donald Trump's hush money conviction because of the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling on presidential immunity. But the overall future of the historic case remains unclear.

Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan's decision blocks one potential off-ramp from the case ahead of the former and future president's return to office next month. His lawyers have raised other arguments for dismissal, however. It's unclear when — or whether — a sentencing date might be set.

Prosecutors have said there should be some accommodation for his upcoming presidency, but they insist the conviction should stand.

A jury convicted Trump in May of 34 counts of falsifying business records related to a \$130,000 hush money payment to porn actor Stormy Daniels in 2016. Trump denies wrongdoing.

The allegations involved a scheme to hide the payout to Daniels during the final days of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign to keep her from publicizing — and keep voters from hearing — her claim of a sexual encounter with the married then-businessman years earlier. He says nothing sexual happened between them.

A month after the verdict, the Supreme Court ruled that ex-presidents can't be prosecuted for official acts — things they did in the course of running the country — and that prosecutors can't cite those actions to bolster a case centered on purely personal, unofficial conduct.

Trump's lawyers then cited the Supreme Court opinion to argue that the hush money jury got some improper evidence, such as Trump's presidential financial disclosure form, testimony from some White House aides and social media posts made while he was in office.

In Monday's ruling, Merchan denied the bulk of Trump's claims that some of prosecutors' evidence related to official acts and implicated immunity protections.

The judge said that even if he found that some evidence related to official conduct, he'd still conclude that prosecutors' decision to use "these acts as evidence of the decidedly personal acts of falsifying business records poses no danger of intrusion on the authority and function of the Executive Branch."

Even if prosecutors had erroneously introduced evidence that could be challenged under an immunity claim, Merchan continued, "such error was harmless in light of the overwhelming evidence of guilt."

Prosecutors had said the evidence in question was only "a sliver" of their case.

Trump communications director Steven Cheung on Monday called Merchan's decision a "direct violation of the Supreme Court's decision on immunity, and other longstanding jurisprudence."

"This lawless case should have never been brought, and the Constitution demands that it be immediately dismissed," Cheung said in a statement.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office, which prosecuted the case, declined to comment.

Merchan's decision noted that part of the Supreme Court's immunity ruling declared that "not everything the president does is official." Trump's social media posts, for example, were personal, Merchan wrote.

He also pointed to a prior federal court ruling that concluded that the hush money payment and subsequent reimbursements pertained to Trump's private life, not official duties.

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Trump, a Republican, takes office Jan. 20. He's the first former president to be convicted of a felony and the first convicted criminal to be elected to the office.

Over the last six months, his lawyers have made numerous efforts to get the conviction and the overall case dismissed. After Trump won last month's election, Merchan indefinitely postponed his sentencing — which had been scheduled for late November — so defense lawyers and prosecutors could suggest next steps.

Trump's defense argued that anything other than immediate dismissal would undermine the transfer of power and cause unconstitutional "disruptions" to the presidency.

Meanwhile, prosecutors proposed several ways to preserve the historic conviction. Among the suggestions: freezing the case until Trump leaves office in 2029; agreeing that any future sentence won't include jail time; or closing the case by noting he was convicted but that he wasn't sentenced and his appeal wasn't resolved because he took office.

The last idea is drawn from what some states do when a defendant dies after conviction but before sentencing.

Trump's lawyers branded the concept "absurd" and took issue with the other suggestions, too.

Trump was indicted four times last year. The hush money case was the only one to go to trial.

After the election, special counsel Jack Smith ended his two federal cases. They pertained to Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss and allegations that he hoarded classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate.

A separate state election interference case in Fulton County, Georgia, is largely on hold.

Trump denies wrongdoing in all.

Jay-Z's lawyer says accuser's rape claim is 'provably, demonstrably false'

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — An attorney defending Jay-Z against the rape allegation brought against him last week by an unnamed woman outlined a range of evidence Monday that he said showed the accuser's account to be "provably, demonstrably false."

The woman told NBC News last week that Jay-Z and Sean "Diddy" Combs sexually assaulted her in 2000, when she was 13, at an after-party for the MTV Music Awards. She has since acknowledged certain inconsistencies in her story.

Speaking to reporters at Roc Nation's New York headquarters, Jay-Z's attorney, Alex Spiro, said the woman's claim relied on an "impossible timeline" and a nonexistent location. While the lawsuit said the assault happened at a "large white residence with a U-shaped driveway," photos show both Jay-Z, whose legal name is Shawn Carter, and Combs at a nightclub following the award show.

In the suit, the woman said she snuck out of a window of her home in Rochester and hitched a ride to the award ceremony from a friend, who has since died. She said she watched the event on a jumbotron outside, then befriended a limousine driver who drove her to the house party where she was assaulted by the two rap moguls.

Following the alleged rape, she said she fled the house and called her father for a ride home from a nearby gas station.

The allegation, Spiro said, "defies credibility." It would've taken her five hours to drive from Rochester, the lawyer noted, meaning she would've had to leave her home by 3 p.m. Permits and photographs show there was no jumbotron outside the VMAs in 2000, according to Spiro. The woman's father has said he does not recall driving from Rochester to pick her up in New York City.

"It's not just that this story is a lie and that it's not true, it's provably, demonstrably false," Spiro said. "This never happened."

The suit comes amid a wave of sexual assault lawsuits levied against Combs, who remains in custody in New York awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges. He has pleaded not guilty and faces trial in May.

The lawsuits were filed on the eve of the expiration of the Adult Survivors Act, a New York law permitting victims of sexual abuse a one-year window to file civil action regardless of the statute of limitations.

After initially suing Combs, the woman's complaint was amended to include a new allegation that Jay-Z also participated in the sexual assault as a third unnamed celebrity watched.

The litigation was filed by Tony Buzbee, a personal injury attorney in Houston whose firm has set up a toll-free phone line for accusers. In October, Buzbee said he was representing some 120 people, men and women, with allegations of sexual misconduct against Combs.

Last month, Jay-Z anonymously sued Buzbee, alleging the lawyer had attempted to blackmail him by making the rape allegation public if he did not agree to a legal settlement. Buzbee has said the letter was simply trying to set up a confidential mediation session.

In a statement last week, Jay-Z said his "heart and support goes out to true victims in the world."

On Monday, Spiro accused Buzbee of "taking advantage" of the woman, while "destroying this opportunity and the voices of real victims."

In an emailed statement Monday, Buzbee said the woman had been referred to him by another law firm and vetted by four attorneys from his firm.

"Courts exist to resolve factual disputes," Buzbee added. "Our client remains adamant about her claim."

Drone detectors in New Jersey have found 'little or no evidence' of wrongdoing, governor says

By DAVE COLLINS and MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Drone-detecting devices deployed in New Jersey in the past week have found "little to no evidence" of anything nefarious or threatening, Gov. Phil Murphy said Monday as calls grew for action to address the mysterious nighttime sightings of suspected unmanned flights across the north-eastern U.S.

Murphy told reporters in Trenton that there were 12 sightings of suspected drones in the state on Saturday and one on Sunday. He declined to go into detail about the detection equipment, but said it was powerful enough to disable the drones, although he added that is not legal on U.S. soil.

Murphy, a Democrat, echoed calls by state officials elsewhere for Congress to allow them to deal with drones. Nearly all the power now rests with the federal government.

"It is extraordinary to me that, that a nation as great as ours and as powerful as ours has the deficiencies that we have now seen in living color as it relates to drone incursions," Murphy said.

Federal officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, have repeatedly said there are no signs that any drone operators have shown bad intent, nor is there evidence of foreign involvement.

"There's no question that people are seeing drones," Mayorkas told ABC's George Stephanopoulos on Sunday. "But I want to assure the American public that we are on it. We are working in close coordination with state and local authorities."

But that hasn't reassured everyone. Conspiracy theories about foreign actors, the U.S. government and the "deep state," abound online, while elected officials concerned about threats to military bases, airports and other locations have increased their calls for federal officials to act.

The skeptics include President-elect Donald Trump, who suggested Monday that "the government knows what is happening."

"Our military knows and our president knows and for some reason they want to keep people in suspense," Trump said. He refused to say whether he had been briefed on the drone sightings.

New Jersey Sen. Andy Kim, a Democrat, told The Associated Press that officials could do a better job helping the public to understand what is going on, especially when people wrongly conclude they are seeing unmanned aircraft.

"What the public could use is like walking through that rather than just, you know, as a statement that says nothing, nothing to be concerned about," he said. "I think it's reached a level of just public attention that some greater level of depth is necessary."

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Kim said he's heard no supporting evidence for the president-elect's statement Monday that information is being withheld and that a lack of faith in institutions is playing a key part in the saga.

"Nothing that I'm seeing, nothing that I've engaged in gives me any impression of that nature. But like, I get it, some people won't believe me, right? Because that's the level of distrust that we face."

Over the past two days, New York and Pennsylvania officials have also requested drone-detecting equipment from federal officials.

"It is imperative our communities in Pennsylvania are protected and questions on the presence of these drones are answered," U.S. Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a Pennsylvania Republican, wrote in a letter to Mayorkas on Monday. "State-of-the-art radar systems will provide insights into where these drones are deploying from and what the motives for their flights may be."

After reports of drones in Connecticut, state police said they were monitoring drone activity and state officials said analysts were comparing reported sightings with federal flight data.

"One of the drone sightings had the word Frontier on the back, that was an airline," Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, said Monday. "But some of them are big and unexplained and we're going to get to the bottom of this. Right now, what we do is we make sure that our security and airports are secure."

At a media briefing on Monday, the Pentagon's press secretary, Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, said defense officials have seen no indication that the drones flying over multiple locations in the U.S. are being controlled by a foreign country. According to the Federal Aviation Administration, he said, there are approximately 1 million registered drones in the U.S. and about 8,000 are flying any given day.

Ryder said that while military bases overseas can use surveillance methods that quickly address the origin of drones, that power is limited in U.S. airspace because of domestic surveillance laws. He said most drones are operated through either radio frequency transmissions or satellite-guided GPS navigation, which can provide information about the operators. If they're not controlled by those methods, that's another clue, he said.

"So I'm kind of talking around it because I don't necessarily want to get into talking classified capabilities, but the bottom line is that all of that gives us an idea that, hey, these are not foreign origin," Ryder said.

Christopher Stadulis, a retired New York City firefighter and drone hobbyist, said he's seen clusters of drones near his home in Clinton Township, New Jersey. He said the lights he has seen at night are different from those used by commercial airlines, and the drones he has seen are very large.

"When you look at what I'm seeing with the naked eye, you can see it's not a normal aircraft," he said in a recent interview. "This and we don't have this much traffic, you know, usually on any given night in this area. So it seems like definitely some of them are aircraft that we can't explain what they are."

More suspected drone sightings over the weekend led to a temporary airspace shutdown at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, for about four hours late Friday into Saturday, and the arrests of two men in Boston accused of flying a drone "dangerously close" to Logan International Airport.

U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer, a New Jersey Democrat, said Monday that he is introducing legislation calling on federal officials to provide public briefings on what they know about the drones and calling for a drone air traffic control system similar to those used for planes. He also wants law enforcement to be given access to drone detectors and the authority to "take out drones that shouldn't be in the air."

"I believe the people I represent and, as I've been saying for some time now, the people in New Jersey and around the country deserve answers," he said in a statement. "They deserve transparency from their government."

Is that a drone or a plane? Experts help explain the differences

By JOHN SEEWER and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

Up in the sky, is that a drone, a plane or a helicopter?

Experts who study unmanned aircraft systems — better known as drones — say it can be tough to tell from miles away. But there are clues.

A light in the sky at night can easily be misinterpreted, according to John Slaughter, director of the Un-

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manned Aircraft Systems Research and Operations Center at the University of Maryland.

"You can't just walk outside and say, 'Oh, that's not a drone,' or 'That is one.' All you can really factually say is 'I saw a light in the sky,'" Slaughter said.

Dozens of mysterious nighttime flights first spotted in New Jersey last month and now being seen across the U.S. have raised concerns among residents and officials. Part of the worry stems from the flying objects initially being spotted near the Picatinny Arsenal, a U.S. military research and manufacturing facility, and over President-elect Donald Trump's golf course in Bedminster.

Are those flashing lights a plane?

Planes and helicopters all have a flashing lights and typically at least one red anti-collision light, often two. They also sport navigation lights, which are steady, red and green colored lights like the ones found on boats. Many will also have flashing white strobe lights at their wingtips. And they have bright landing lights.

Drones flying at night are only required to have one bright, anti-collision light that's visible 3 miles (5 kilometers) away. But drone owners can add other lights, so some have more than one. Drones are smaller, so when they have multiple lights they are close together, but at night it's often not possible to figure out precisely how far away they are.

"A light is just a bright point," Slaughter said. "And it might be 100 yards (90 meters) away, it could be literally 40 miles (65 kilometers) away and it looks the same."

What noise does a drone make?

Drones tend to be quieter and make a more high-pitched buzzing noise than what's generated by the jet engines or propellers that drive planes and helicopters. But bigger drones can be louder, and the sound may be difficult to discern from a distance.

Drones heavier than about a half-pound (0.2 kilograms) may have an identifying number displayed on the outside.

"You certainly wouldn't see it at night, and you'd have to be up close to see it, you know, in the daytime," said Paul R. Snyder, director of the Unmanned Aircraft System program in the University of North Dakota's Aerospace Sciences School.

Does a drone move like that?

Planes and even helicopters tend to move smoothly in the air, but multi-copter drones can stop on a dime, pivot 90 degrees and reverse course, Slaughter said.

"That kind of motion can give you a clue that you're looking at a drone, not an aircraft," he said.

And the vast majority of drones will be operating below 400 feet (122 meters), following federal regulations.

Trump weighs in on NY mayor, vaccines and drones in freewheeling press conference at Mar-a-Lago

By COLLEEN LONG and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — In a freewheeling press conference at his Mar-a-Lago club, President-elect Donald Trump said Monday he would consider pardoning embattled New York Mayor Eric Adams, declared the country was "not going to lose" the polio vaccine and weighed in on the flurry of drone sightings over New Jersey.

Holding court with reporters for the first time since he won the election and secured a second term, Trump also called on the Biden administration to stop selling off unused portions of southern border wall, threatening legal action.

"We're going to spend hundreds of millions of dollars more on building the same wall we already have," he railed. "It's almost a criminal act."

Trump's performance Monday underscored how he has already forced his return to the center of the national political conversation, weeks before he is set to return to the Oval Office. The session was notably less combative than some of the more heated exchanges he held with reporters during the campaign. Trump, looking relaxed at the lectern, joked with those he recognized and talked about how much easier the transition has been than after his first election.

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"The first time everybody was fighting me," he said. "This time everyone wants to be my friend."

After spending most of the last few weeks mostly behind closed doors at Mar-a-Lago, Trump used the session to test-drive policy ideas, attack his enemies and issue warnings of what is to come.

That included the threat of a lawsuit against famed Iowa pollster Ann Selzer, whose final survey before the election badly underestimated Trump's support in the state, which he won.

"In my opinion it was fraud and election interference," Trump claimed of the survey. Selzer, who declined to comment, announced that she would retire her polling operation last month but said she had decided to before the election.

ABC News announced over the weekend that had it agreed to pay \$15 million toward Trump's presidential library to settle a defamation lawsuit he had filed over anchor George Stephanopoulos' inaccurate on-air assertion that the president-elect had been found civilly liable for raping a writer.

Continuing his threats of legal action, Trump railed Monday against the Biden administration over the border wall material sales, saying he has spoken to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and other Texas officials about a potential restraining order.

Congress last year required the Biden administration to dispose of the unused border wall pieces. The measure, included in the massive National Defense Authorization Act, allows for the sale or donation of the items to states on the southern border, providing they are used to refurbish existing barriers, not install new ones. Congress also directed the Pentagon to account for storage costs for the border wall material while it has gone unused.

"I'm asking today, Joe Biden, to please stop selling the wall," Trump said.

The Department of Defense, however, said that further sales can't be blocked because all the excess border wall material has already been distributed. Most was provided to other federal agencies and state governments, as required by defense legislation signed on Dec. 22, 2023. The rest was sold to GovPlanet, which buys and auctions off government surplus.

While Trump described the handover between Biden and his incoming team as "a friendly transition," he also took issue with efforts to allow some members of the federal workforce to continue working from home. Trump said that if government workers don't come back into the office under him, they will be dismissed.

Trump also weighed in on Adams, who is facing federal fraud and corruption charges. Asked whether he would consider pardoning Adams, Trump said, "Yeah I would."

"I think that he was treated pretty unfairly," Trump said, while at the same time acknowledging he doesn't "know the facts."

Adams has been accused of accepting flight upgrades and other luxury travel perks valued at \$100,000 along with illegal campaign contributions from a Turkish official and other foreign nationals looking to buy his influence. He has pleaded not guilty. Multiple members of his administration have also come under investigation.

Adams, who insists he did nothing wrong, told reporters Monday that his attorney was "going to look at every avenue to ensure I get justice."

Trump was pressed repeatedly on the future of vaccines, amid concerns over his decision to choose the anti-vaccine advocate, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, which regulates the shots.

Trump again declined to dismiss the long-debunked theory that vaccines cause autism and said Kennedy would be examining that already well-studied question.

But he also assured the public that one of the most successful vaccines would not be barred by his administration.

"You're not going to lose the polio vaccine," he said, calling himself "a big believer in it."

"That's not going to happen," he said.

Outgoing Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who had polio as a child, had said Friday that Trump's nominees seeking Senate confirmation should "steer clear" of efforts to discredit the polio vaccine, calling

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them not just uninformed, but "dangerous."

Trump also weighed in on the mysterious drone sightings over parts of New Jersey and the eastern U.S. that have sparked speculation and concern over where they are coming from.

Taking a conspiratorial tone, Trump insisted, without offering evidence, that, "the government knows what is happening."

"Our military knows and our president knows and for some reason they want to keep people in suspense," he said, refusing to say whether he had been briefed on the sightings.

White House spokesperson John Kirby said later Monday that there is no indication that the drones pose a public safety or national security threat, and that he would say so if that weren't the case. While he acknowledged frustrations, he stressed that there are more 1 million legal drones in the country.

"Having closely examined the data," he said, "we assess that the sightings to date include a combination of lawful commercial drones, hobbyist drones and law enforcement drones, as well as manned fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and even stars that were mistakenly reported as drones."

Trump has spent the weeks since his victory building out his incoming administration and speaking with what he said were well over 100 word leaders.

But he again played coy on whether that list included Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"I'm not going to comment on the Putin question," he said.

When it comes to escalating tensions in the Middle East, Trump said he would consider pulling U.S. troops out of Syria after the country's ousted leader, Bashar Assad, was overthrown by rebels.

"I don't think that I want to have our soldiers killed," Trump said of the 900 men and women who were placed there to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State group.

In addition to meetings with foreign leaders, Trump also talked about a recent dinner with Apple CEO Tim Cook as well as the heads of major pharmaceutical companies, which Kennedy joined. The outreach, he said, made this transition feel markedly different from 2016, when his win shocked the Washington establishment.

Trump was joined at the appearance by SoftBank Group CEO Masayoshi Son, who announced that the Japanese company is planning to invest \$100 billion in U.S. projects over the next four years.

It was a win for Trump, who has used the weeks since the election to promote his policies, negotiate with foreign leaders and try to strike deals.

In a post on his Truth Social site last week, Trump had said that anyone making a \$1 billion investment in the United States "will receive fully expedited approvals and permits, including, but in no way limited to, all Environmental approvals."

"GET READY TO ROCK!!!" he wrote.

Trump has repeatedly boasted that he has done more in his short transition period than his predecessor did in all four years.

"There's a whole light over the entire world," he said Monday. "There's a light shining over the world."

Bolivian prosecutors seek the arrest of former President Morales in sexual abuse case

LA PAZ, Bolivia (AP) — Prosecutors in Bolivia on Monday sought the arrest of former President Evo Morales in connection to a sexual abuse investigation involving his alleged fathering of a child with a 15-year-old girl.

The arrest warrant, which still must be approved by a judge, was issued after Morales defied an order to testify in the case.

Morales, a former coca grower who ruled Bolivia for 13 years until 2019, has been holed up in the rural area of Chapare, ringed by loyal supporters, since talk of his arrest first surfaced in September.

Morales, 65, is alleged to have had a child with a teenage girl in 2016 — a sexual relationship that would have constituted statutory rape under Bolivian law.

Morales hasn't commented yet on the arrest order but previously denied any wrongdoing and accused his handpicked successor, fellow leftist Luis Arce, of conspiring with his enemies to prevent him from run-

ning in next year's presidential election.

"It's a dark plan to eliminate me politically and physically," Morales said previously.

On Monday, police were repelled in a standoff with Morales supporters, who accused the authorities of acting violently.

Trump says he's a 'believer' in polio vaccine, and other news conference takeaways

By MICHELLE L. PRICE and ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

President-elect Donald Trump on Monday held a wide-ranging news conference in which he said he would preserve access to the polio vaccine but equivocated on other vaccines, pledged to look at bringing down the costs of pharmaceuticals and expressed doubts that his daughter-in-law might be Florida's next senator.

Trump held forth for over an hour, the first time he took questions from reporters since winning the election. The event harkens back to his long-winding news conferences from his first term and is a stark contrast from President Joe Biden, who doesn't often take questions from reporters.

Here's a look at some of what he touched on:

Trump provides some assurances on polio vaccine

Trump defended his choice for health secretary, prominent vaccine skeptic Robert F. Kennedy Jr., but said he personally is a "big believer" in the polio vaccine and would preserve access to it.

"You're not going to lose the polio vaccine," he said. "That's not going to happen."

Over the weekend, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, who had polio as a child, spoke out in defense of the polio vaccine after a recent report disclosed that one of Kennedy's advisers filed a petition to revoke approval for the polio vaccine in 2022.

Kennedy has long advanced the debunked idea that vaccines cause autism. Trump seemed to question whether there's a link, saying "We're looking to find out," and remarked on the rising cases of autism being diagnosed.

"There's something wrong, and we're going to find out about it," he said.

There are no blood or biological tests for autism; instead, a doctor bases the diagnosis on a child's behavior. While the autism diagnosis has been available for at least 80 years, the definition gradually expanded to include milder cases, which are more common. A study last year found that about a quarter of kids with autism — about 110,000 in the U.S. — have the most severe version of the developmental disability, which has left them unable to speak or with an IQ below 50 or both.

Of Kennedy, "He's going to be much less radical than you would think," he said. "I think he's got a very open mind, or I wouldn't have put him there."

Trump blames middlemen for high price of pharmaceutical drugs

Trump described a dinner he had this month with Kennedy; Dr. Mehmet Oz, a celebrity heart surgeon turned talk show host and lifestyle guru whom he's tapped to run the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; and top pharmaceutical executives in which they discussed drug prices.

Trump heaped praise on the companies — the same ones that Kennedy has routinely argued profit off of Americans unfairly — but said the high cost of health care was a focus of their dinner.

"What came out of that meeting is that we're paying far too much," Trump said.

Trump also hit pharmaceutical benefits managers, calling them "horrible middlemen" who drive up the cost of drugs. Pharmaceutical companies have been aggressively lobbying Congress to restrict the role of pharmaceutical benefit managers, which help health insurance companies' biggest clients decide how and what prescription drugs will be covered in their insurance plans.

"I don't know who these middlemen are, but they are rich as hell," Trump said.

Trump's appearance is a clear break from Biden's style

The press conference was Trump's most extensive public appearance since his victory six weeks ago — a rare absence from the public stage for the former reality star.

But it also underscored how even while president-elect, Trump has seized the spotlight from Biden, who

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still has a month left on his term in office. Biden has not held a press conference in months and has had a limited public schedule.

While Trump was addressing some of the top-of-mind issues of the day -- including sightings of drones flying over the Northeast -- Biden himself has been silent, leaving it to aides to try to calm the public.

'I don't know' if Lara Trump will be a senator

Trump seemed skeptical that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis would appoint his daughter-in-law to be a Florida senator, taking the seat held by Marco Rubio, who has been nominated for secretary of state.

Asked whether he expected DeSantis to name Lara Trump to replace Rubio, Trump said, "I probably don't, but I don't know." Trump recently spoke with DeSantis at a memorial for Florida law enforcement officers.

Trump's allies have been pushing DeSantis to nominate Lara Trump, who is married to Trump's son, Eric, and served as co-chair of the Republican National Committee this year.

"Ron's doing a good job with his choice," Trump said, without elaborating.

He lavished praise on Lara Trump, including for her work at the RNC, where part of her duties involved focusing on "election integrity," a priority of Trump's after he falsely claimed fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

Trump open to intervening in potential TikTok ban

Trump indicated he would look at intervening in the potential ban of TikTok in the U.S. The popular social media platform must cut ties with its China-based parent company or be banned by mid-January under a federal law.

He didn't offer specifics, but Trump credited the platform with helping him win the election. His campaign saw it as a bridge to reach younger, less politically engaged voters, particularly when clips circulated showing him with celebrities at UFC fights.

"We'll take a look at TikTok," he said. "You know, I have a warm spot in my heart for TikTok."

Trump tried to ban TikTok during his first term but changed his mind and pledged to "save" TikTok. Once he takes office, his Justice Department would be tasked with enforcing the new federal law against TikTok.

Trump on Monday was meeting with TikTok CEO Shou Chew at his Mar-a-Lago club, according to two people familiar with the president-elect's plans who were not authorized to speak publicly about them and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

'Everybody wants to be my friend,' he says

Trump noted the differences between the first time he was to take office eight years ago and today, saying executives now want to meet with him.

He said they were "hostile" back then.

"Everybody was fighting me," he said about his first term. "This term, everybody wants to be my friend. I don't know. My personality changed or something."

While he left office in 2021 ostracized and angry, Trump has had a stunning turnaround leading to his election win. Last week, he was honored by being named Time magazine's Person of the Year and ringing the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

His meeting with the TikTok executive was part of a string of meetings he's had with Silicon Valley billionaires and other technology leaders since becoming president-elect. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, Apple CEO Tim Cook and Google CEO Sundar Pichai have all flown to Trump's club to meet with him.

He revealed Monday that he had also met with Google co-founder Sergey Brin. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos will meet with him this week, Trump said.

"We have a lot of great executives coming in — the top executives, the top bankers, they're all calling," he said. "It's like a complete opposite from the first one."

Trump already returning to world stage

With multiple wars going on, Trump has sought to insert himself back on the world stage. He said he is working to get Israeli hostages held by Hamas in Gaza to be released and had a "very good talk" with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

But on Monday he seemed to buffer expectations about his promise to solve the Russia-Ukraine war

even before taking office, describing the conflict as a “tough one” and a “nasty one.”

“We are trying to get that war stopped, that horrible, horrible war” he said. “It’s a tough one. It’s a nasty one. It’s nasty. People are being killed at levels that nobody’s ever seen.”

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is Europe’s biggest armed conflict since World War II and has cost tens of thousands of lives on both sides.

Trump declined to say whether he’s spoken to Russian President Vladimir Putin since winning the election. He met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Paris this month when he visited for the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral.

Trump’s incoming press secretary has said that Trump invited Chinese leader Xi Jinping and other world leaders to his Jan. 20 inauguration, but Trump said Monday that Zelenskyy was not among them. “If he’d like to come, I’d like to have him,” Trump said.

Trump said Xi has not yet said whether he is coming. He described the Chinese leader as “a friend of mine” and “an amazing guy” but acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their relationship. “It was a bridge too far for me,” he said.

Negotiators say Israel and Hamas are inching toward a ceasefire deal. This is what it may look like

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

After months of deadlock, Israel and Hamas appear to be moving closer toward a ceasefire to end their 14-month war.

Top officials from the U.S., Qatar and Egypt have resumed their mediation efforts in recent weeks and reported greater willingness by the warring sides to wrap up a deal. In a key concession, Hamas officials say they are prepared to show more “flexibility” on the timing of an Israeli troop withdrawal from Gaza, and Israel’s defense minister, Israel Katz, said Monday that a deal is closer than ever.

Officials on all sides have cautioned that key details must still be worked out. But there is a general sense of optimism that has been lacking for many months.

The changing sentiment appears to be the result of several factors. Israel has inflicted heavy damage on Hamas over the course of the war. The group is more isolated after Hezbollah’s ceasefire with Israel, and Iran, a key backer of both militant groups, has suffered a number of setbacks, highlighted by the downfall of its close ally, Syria’s Bashar Assad.

In the U.S., both the outgoing Biden administration and the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump have signaled they want a deal completed before the Jan. 20 inauguration.

According to Egyptian and Hamas officials, the agreement would take place in phases and include a halt in fighting, an exchange of captive Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, and a surge in aid to the besieged Gaza Strip. Israel says Hamas is holding 100 hostages — over one-third of whom are believed to be dead.

Here is a closer look at the emerging deal, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were discussing closed negotiations.

Preliminary ceasefire

The first phase would last from six to eight weeks. During that time, Hamas would release some 30 hostages – roughly half of those believed alive. They include three or four dual U.S.-Israeli citizens.

Israel would release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including as many as 100 who are serving long sentences for alleged involvement in bloody attacks.

Increased aid

The deal calls for a massive increase in aid to Gaza, which has plunged into a humanitarian crisis during the 14-month war. An estimated 90% of Gaza’s 2.3 million people have been displaced, in many cases multiple times, and aid workers report severe hunger across the territory.

This is expected to include a reopening of the territory’s Rafah crossing with Egypt, which has been closed since Israeli ground troops invaded the southern border town in May. The crossing is especially

important because it is the primary exit point for Palestinians in Gaza who want to travel abroad, and the only one not controlled by Israel.

Mediators say they are considering a return to a 2005 agreement that allowed the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority to operate the crossing with European Union observers. That agreement collapsed when Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 and expelled the Palestinian Authority forces.

Israeli troop withdrawals

During the first phase, Israeli troops would withdraw from some Palestinian population centers, allowing many Palestinians to begin returning home. But Israeli troops wouldn't leave Gaza altogether at this stage. They would remain along the Philadelphi corridor – a strategic strip of land along Gaza's border with Egypt.

Ending the war

During the initial ceasefire, the sides would continue negotiations on a permanent agreement, to include an end to the war, full withdrawal of Israeli troops, and release of remaining hostages and bodies held by Hamas.

Talks would begin on final arrangements for Gaza, including who would govern the territory and plans for rebuilding the destruction.

Ukraine and US say some North Korean troops have been killed fighting alongside Russian forces

By SAMYA KULLAB and TARA COPP Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's military intelligence agency and the Pentagon said Monday that some North Korean troops have been killed during combat against Ukrainian forces in Russia's Kursk border region.

These are the first reported casualties since the U.S. and Ukraine announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost 3-year war.

Ukraine's military intelligence agency said around 30 North Korean troops were killed or wounded during battle with the Ukrainian army over the weekend.

The casualties occurred around three villages in Kursk, where Russia has for four months been trying to quash a Ukrainian incursion, the agency, known by its acronym GUR, said in a public post on the Telegram messaging app.

At least three North Korean servicemen went missing around another Kursk village, GUR said.

The White House also said it now believes North Korean troops are on the "front lines" of Russia's war and are "actively engaged in combat operations" against Ukraine.

National security spokesman John Kirby confirmed the assessment Monday after Ukraine's government said North Korean troops had moved from support roles into direct fighting on behalf of Russia. Kirby said North Korean troops are taking casualties in the fighting and promised a strong U.S. and allied sanctions response to North Korea.

Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, told reporters that some North Korean troops have died in combat in Kursk but did not have a specific number of those killed or wounded. Those troops have primarily been used in an infantry role and started fighting in combat operations about a week ago, Ryder said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov referred questions to the Russian Defense Ministry, which didn't immediately comment.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has pledged unwavering support for Russia's full-scale invasion of its neighbor under a mutual defense pact.

The alliance gave a jolt to international relations, and Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday that the planned deployment of U.S. intermediate-range missiles to Europe and Asia has brought new threats.

"In view of rising geopolitical tensions, we must take additional measures to ensure the security of Russia and our allies," Putin told a meeting with top military brass. "We are doing it accurately and in a balanced way to avoid being drawn into a full-scale arms race."

However, military analysts say the language barrier has bedeviled combat coordination between Russian and North Korean troops.

"The poor integration and ongoing communication problems between Russian and North Korean forces will likely continue to cause friction in Russian military operations in Kursk ... in the near term," the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank, said late Sunday.

On Nov. 5, Ukrainian officials said their forces had for the first time engaged with North Korean units that had been recently deployed to help Russia.

Ukraine seized land in Russia's Kursk border region last August in what was the first occupation of Russian territory since World War II. The operation embarrassed the Kremlin and aimed to counter unceasingly glum news from the front line.

The incursion hasn't significantly changed the war's dynamics. Over the past year, Russia has been on the front foot, with the exception of Kursk, and has been grinding deeper into eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region despite heavy losses.

Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov said Monday the military has been making steady gains in Ukraine, claiming that they have accelerated recently, with Russian forces capturing about 30 square kilometers (11.5 square miles) of territory a day.

TikTok asks the Supreme Court for an emergency order to block a US ban unless it's sold

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — TikTok on Monday asked the Supreme Court to step in on an emergency basis to block the federal law that would ban the popular platform in the United States unless its China-based parent company agreed to sell it.

Lawyers for the company and China-based ByteDance urged the justices to step in before the law's Jan. 19 deadline. A similar plea was filed by content creators who rely on the platform for income and some of TikTok's more than 170 million users in the U.S.

"A modest delay in enforcing the Act will create breathing room for this Court to conduct an orderly review and the new Administration to evaluate this matter — before this vital channel for Americans to communicate with their fellow citizens and the world is closed," lawyers for the companies told the Supreme Court.

President-elect Donald Trump, who once supported a ban but then pledged during the campaign to "save TikTok," said his administration would take a look at the situation.

"As you know, I have a warm spot in my heart for TikTok," Trump said during a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida. His campaign saw the platform as a way to reach younger, less politically engaged voters.

Trump was meeting with TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew at Mar-a-Lago on Monday, according to two people familiar with the president-elect's plans who were not authorized to speak publicly about them and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The companies have said that a shutdown lasting just a month would cause TikTok to lose about a third of its daily users in the U.S. and significant advertising revenue.

The case could attract the court's interest because it pits free speech rights against the government's stated aims of protecting national security, while raising novel issues about social media platforms.

The request first goes to Chief Justice John Roberts, who oversees emergency appeals from courts in the nation's capital. He almost certainly will seek input from all nine justices.

On Friday, a panel of federal judges on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit denied an emergency plea to block the law, a procedural ruling that allowed the case to move to the Supreme Court.

The same panel had earlier unanimously upheld the law over a First Amendment challenge claiming that it violated free speech rights.

Without a court-ordered freeze, the law would take effect Jan. 19 and expose app stores that offer TikTok and internet hosting services that support it to potential fines.

It would be up to the Justice Department to enforce the law, investigating possible violations and seek-

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ing sanctions. But lawyers for TikTok and ByteDance have argued that Trump's Justice Department might pause enforcement or otherwise seek to mitigate the law's most severe consequences. Trump takes office a day after the law goes into effect.

The Supreme Court could temporarily put the law on hold so that the justices can give fuller consideration to First Amendment and other issues. They also could quickly schedule arguments and try to render a decision by Jan. 19.

On the other hand, the high court could reject the emergency appeal, which would allow the law to take effect as scheduled.

With that last prospect in mind, the companies' lawyers asked for a ruling on their emergency request by Jan. 6 because they'd need the time "to coordinate with their service providers to perform the complex task of shutting down the TikTok platform only in the United States."

The case has made a relatively quick trip through the courts once bipartisan majorities in Congress approved the law and President Joe Biden signed it in April.

2024 was big for bitcoin. States could see a crypto policy blitz in 2025 in spite of the risks

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The new year will usher in the bitcoin-friendly administration of President-elect Donald Trump and an expanding lobbying effort in statehouses that, together, could push states to become more open to crypto and for public pension funds and treasuries to buy into it.

Proponents of the uniquely volatile commodity argue it is a valuable hedge against inflation, similar to gold.

Many bitcoin enthusiasts and investors are quick to criticize government-backed currencies as prone to devaluation and say increased government buy-in will stabilize bitcoin's future price swings, give it more legitimacy and further boost an already rising price.

But the risks are significant. Critics say a crypto investment is highly speculative, with so much unknown about projecting its future returns, and warn that investors should be prepared to lose money.

Only a couple public pension funds have invested in cryptocurrency and a new U.S. Government Accountability Office study on 401(k) plan investments in crypto, issued in recent days, warned it has "uniquely high volatility" and that it found no standard approach for projecting the future returns of crypto.

It has already been a landmark year for crypto, with bitcoin hitting \$100,000, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission approving the first exchange-traded funds that hold bitcoin and crypto enthusiasts being cheered by Trump's promise to make the United States the "bitcoin superpower" of the world.

More legislation on crypto could be coming

Lawmakers in more states can expect to see bills in 2025 to make them crypto-friendly as analysts say crypto is becoming a powerful lobby, bitcoin miners build new installations and venture capitalists underwrite a growing tech sector that caters to cryptocurrencies.

Meanwhile, a new crypto-friendly federal government under Trump and Congress could consider legislation from Sen. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyoming, to create a federal bitcoin reserve on which states can piggyback.

A bill introduced last month in Pennsylvania's House of Representatives sought to authorize the state's treasurer and public pension funds to invest in bitcoin. It went nowhere before the legislative session ended, but it caused a stir.

"I had a friend who is a rep down the road text me, 'Oh my god, I'm getting so many emails and phone calls to my office,' more than he ever did about any other bill," said the measure's sponsor, Republican Mike Cabell.

Cabell — a bitcoin enthusiast who lost his reelection bid — expects his bill to be reintroduced by a colleague. And leaders of bitcoin advocacy group Satoshi Action say they expect bills based on their model bill to be introduced in at least 10 other states next year.

But what about public pension funds?

Keith Brainard, research director for the National Association of State Retirement Administrators, said

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he doesn't expect many public pension fund investment professionals, who oversee nearly \$6 trillion in assets, to invest in crypto.

Pension fund professionals take risks they deem to be appropriate, but bitcoin investing has a short track record, might only fit into a niche asset class and may not fit the risk-to-reward profile they seek.

"There might be a bit of dabbling in bitcoin," Brainard said. "But it's difficult to envision a scenario in which pension funds right now are willing to make a commitment."

In Louisiana, Treasurer John Fleming helped make the state the first to introduce a system by which people can pay a government agency in cryptocurrencies.

Fleming said he's not trying to promote cryptocurrency, but rather sees the step as a recognition that government must innovate and be flexible in helping people make financial transactions with the state. He said he would never invest his money, or the state's, in crypto.

Fleming recalled meeting with a bitcoin lobbyist recently and came away unconvinced that bitcoin makes for a good investment.

"My concern is that at some point it'll stop growing and then people will want to cash in," Fleming said. "And when they do, it could tank the value of a bitcoin."

In Pennsylvania, Treasury Department officials said they have the authority to decide for themselves if cryptocurrencies meet the agency's investment standards under state law and don't need new legislation.

Still, a highly volatile asset is ill-suited to the agency's need for predictability, considering it writes millions of checks a year. The overwhelming majority of the roughly \$60 billion it invests at any given time is in short-term, conservative investments designed for an investment period of months, officials there said.

Pension boards, which invest on a 30-year time horizon, may already hold small investments in companies involved in mining, trading and storing cryptocurrencies. But they have been slow to embrace bitcoin.

That could change, said Mark Palmer, managing director and a senior research analyst at The Benchmark Company in New York.

Pension boards got investment tools they like this year when the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission approved the first exchange-traded funds that hold bitcoin and, in October, approved listings of options on those funds, Palmer said.

Many "are likely in the process of getting up to speed on what it means to invest in bitcoin and kicking the tires, so to speak, and that's a process that typically takes a while at the institutional level," Palmer said.

Several major asset managers like BlackRock, Invesco and Fidelity have bitcoin ETFs.

Some states already are investing in crypto

In May, the State of Wisconsin Investment Board became the first state to invest when it bought \$160 million worth of shares in two ETFs, or about 0.1% of its assets. It later scaled back that investment to \$104 million in one ETF, as of Sept. 30. A spokesperson declined to discuss it.

Michigan's state investment board later reported about \$18 million in bitcoin ETF purchases while a candidate for New Jersey governor, Steven Fulop, said that if elected he would push the state's pension fund to invest in crypto.

Fulop, the Democratic mayor of Jersey City, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, has been preparing for months to buy bitcoin ETF shares for up to 2% of the city's \$250 million employee pension fund.

"We were ahead of the curve," Fulop said. "And I think that's what you're eventually going to see is this is widely accepted, with regard to exposure in all pension funds, some sort of exposure."

Germany's Scholz loses a confidence vote, setting up an early election in February

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a confidence vote in the German parliament on Monday, putting the European Union's most populous member and biggest economy on course to hold an early election in February.

Scholz won the support of 207 lawmakers in the 733-seat lower house, or Bundestag, while 394 voted

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against him and 116 abstained. That left him far short of the majority of 367 needed to win.

Scholz leads a minority government after his unpopular and notoriously rancorous three-party coalition collapsed on Nov. 6 when he fired his finance minister in a dispute over how to revitalize Germany's stagnant economy. Leaders of several major parties then agreed that a parliamentary election should be held on Feb. 23, seven months earlier than originally planned.

The confidence vote was needed because post-World War II Germany's constitution doesn't allow the Bundestag to dissolve itself. Now President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has to decide whether to dissolve parliament and call an election.

Steinmeier has 21 days to make that decision — and, because of the planned timing of the election, is expected to do so after Christmas. Once parliament is dissolved, the election must be held within 60 days.

In practice, the campaign is already well underway, and Monday's three-hour debate reflected that.

What did the contenders say?

Scholz, a center-left Social Democrat, told lawmakers that the election will determine whether "we, as a strong country, dare to invest strongly in our future; do we have confidence in ourselves and our country, or do we put our future on the line? Do we risk our cohesion and our prosperity by delaying long-overdue investments?"

Scholz's pitch to voters includes pledges to "modernize" Germany's strict self-imposed rules on running up debt, to increase the national minimum wage and to reduce value-added tax on food.

Center-right challenger Friedrich Merz responded that "you're leaving the country in one of its biggest economic crises in postwar history."

"You're standing here and saying, business as usual, let's run up debt at the expense of the younger generation, let's spend money and ... the word 'competitiveness' of the German economy didn't come up once in the speech you gave today," Merz said.

The chancellor said Germany is Ukraine's biggest military supplier in Europe and he wants to keep that up, but underlined his insistence that he won't supply long-range Taurus cruise missiles, over concerns of escalating the war with Russia, or send German troops into the conflict. "We will do nothing that jeopardizes our own security," he said.

Merz, who has been open to sending the long-range missiles, said that "we don't need any lectures on war and peace" from Scholz's party. He said, however, that the political rivals in Berlin are united in an "absolute will to do everything so that this war in Ukraine ends as quickly as possible."

What are their chances?

Polls show Scholz's party trailing well behind Merz's main opposition Union bloc, which is in the lead. Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck of the environmentalist Greens, the remaining partner in Scholz's government, is also bidding for the top job — though his party is further back.

The far-right Alternative for Germany, which is polling strongly, has nominated Alice Weidel as its candidate for chancellor but has no chance of taking the job because other parties refuse to work with it.

Germany's electoral system traditionally produces coalitions, and polls show no party anywhere near an absolute majority on its own. The election is expected to be followed by weeks of negotiations to form a new government.

Confidence votes are rare in Germany, a country of 83 million people that prizes stability. This was only the sixth time in its postwar history that a chancellor had called one.

The last was in 2005, when then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder engineered an early election that was narrowly won by center-right challenger Angela Merkel.

Who is the alleged Chinese spy with close ties to Britain's Prince Andrew?

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — An alleged Chinese spy who cultivated close ties with Prince Andrew said Monday he has done "nothing wrong or unlawful" as Britain's government faced questions about what it is doing to

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thwart security threats from China.

British authorities allege businessman Yang Tengbo — known only as “H6” until a High Court judge lifted an anonymity order Monday — was working on behalf of the United Front Work Department, an arm of the Chinese Communist Party that is used to influence foreign entities.

It’s the most high-profile case in a series of espionage scandals in recent years that involved suspected or confirmed Chinese intelligence-gathering in Britain’s establishment, including in Parliament.

Here’s a look at Yang’s case:

Who is Yang Tengbo?

Yang, 50, also known as Chris Yang, is listed as a director of Hampton Group International, a business consultancy advising U.K.-based companies on their operations in China. He has been photographed with senior U.K. politicians, including former Prime Ministers David Cameron and Theresa May, at events.

Yang is reportedly a key member of Pitch@Palace China, an initiative by Prince Andrew to support entrepreneurs.

Yang worked as a junior civil servant in China before arriving in the U.K. in 2002 to study. He earned a master’s degree in public administration and public policy at the University of York before starting his business.

He was granted the right to live and work in the U.K. for an indefinite period in 2013. Yang told authorities he has spent regular time in Britain and considered it his second home.

What happened with Prince Andrew?

Details about Yang’s case emerged last week at a special immigration tribunal, which upheld a decision by British authorities to ban Yang from entering the U.K. in 2023. The Home Office said he was believed to have carried out “covert and deceptive activity” for the Chinese Communist Party.

Judges agreed with MI5, Britain’s domestic intelligence, that Yang “represented a risk to the national security” and dismissed his appeal.

The tribunal heard that in 2021, authorities found documents that showed how close Yang was to Prince Andrew, King Charles III’s younger brother.

One letter from a senior adviser to Andrew told Yang he should “never underestimate the strength” of his relationship with the royal. “Outside of his closest internal confidants, you sit at the very top of a tree that many, many people would like to be on,” the adviser wrote.

The tribunal said that when Yang was interviewed by immigration authorities he failed to give a full account of his relationship with the prince, which it said had a “covert and clandestine” element.

Authorities have not made public what information Yang allegedly obtained or was seeking to obtain. But the tribunal cited a 2022 statement by the MI5 director that described the United Front Work Department’s aims as buying and exerting influence, amplifying pro-China voices and silencing those critical of the Chinese government’s authority.

Andrew has been repeatedly criticized for his links to wealthy foreigners and prompted critics to suggest that those individuals were trying to buy access to the royal family.

What has been said about the allegations?

Yang strongly denied the espionage claims and said he was a victim of a changing political climate that had seen a rise in tensions between Britain and China.

“I have done nothing wrong or unlawful,” he said in a statement. “The widespread description of me as a ‘spy’ is entirely untrue.”

Andrew’s office said the royal met Yang “through official channels” and nothing of a sensitive nature was ever discussed.

What is the U.K.’s relationship with China?

Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he is concerned about the challenge posed by China, but stood by his government’s strategy of engagement and cooperation with Beijing.

Starmer, who took office this summer, has sought to repair frayed ties and in November became the first British leader to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping since 2018.

Opposition lawmaker Iain Duncan Smith, a leading critic of Beijing, said that glosses over the clear threat China poses. Yang was already a known member of China's United Front Work Department, he told Parliament, and should not have been able to gain access to the royal family without scrutiny.

"The reality is that there are many, many more involved in exactly this kind of espionage that's taking place," he said.

In 2022 British intelligence officials warned politicians that Christine Lee, a British-Chinese lawyer, had been seeking to improperly influence members of Parliament for years. A parliamentary researcher was arrested in 2023 on suspicion of providing sensitive information to China.

Former FBI informant pleads guilty to lying about phony bribery scheme involving the Bidens

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and JAIMIE DING Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A former FBI informant pleaded guilty on Monday to lying about a phony bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden and his son Hunter that became central to the Republican impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Alexander Smirnov entered his plea to a felony charge in connection with the bogus story, along with a tax evasion charge stemming from a separate indictment accusing him of concealing millions of dollars of income.

An attorney for Smirnov, 44, declined to comment after the hearing in Los Angeles federal court.

Prosecutors and the defense have agreed to recommend a sentence of between four and six years in prison when he's sentenced next month.

Smirnov will get credit for the time he has served since his February arrest on charges that he told his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid President Biden and Hunter Biden \$5 million each around 2015.

Smirnov had been an informant for more than a decade when he made the explosive allegations about the Bidens in June 2020, after "expressing bias" about Joe Biden as a presidential candidate, prosecutors said.

But Smirnov had only routine business dealings with Burisma starting in 2017, according to court documents. An FBI field office investigated the allegations and recommended the case be closed in August 2020, according to charging documents.

No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes as president or in his previous office as vice president.

While Smirnov's identity wasn't publicly known before the indictment, his claims played a major part in the Republican effort in Congress to investigate the president and his family, and helped spark a House impeachment inquiry into Biden. Before Smirnov's arrest, Republicans had demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the unverified allegations, though they acknowledged they couldn't confirm if they were true.

During a September 2023 conversation with investigators, Smirnov also claimed the Russians probably had recordings of Hunter Biden because a hotel in Ukraine's capital where he had stayed was "wired" and under their control — information he said was passed along to him by four high-level Russian officials.

But Hunter Biden had never traveled to Ukraine, according to Smirnov's indictment.

Smirnov claimed to have contacts with Russian intelligence-affiliated officials, and told authorities after his arrest this year that "officials associated with Russian intelligence were involved in passing a story" about Hunter Biden.

The case against Smirnov was brought by special counsel David Weiss, who also prosecuted Hunter Biden on gun and tax charges. Hunter Biden was supposed to be sentenced this month after being convicted at a trial in the gun case and pleading guilty to federal charges in the tax case. But he was pardoned this month by his father, who said he believed "raw politics has infected this process and it led to a miscarriage of justice."

Japan's SoftBank plans to invest \$100 billion in US projects over the next four years.

By COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump joined SoftBank Group CEO Masayoshi Son to announce plans by the Japanese company to invest \$100 billion in U.S. projects over the next four years.

Trump announced the planned investments, which are expected to focus on artificial intelligence, at his Mar-a-Lago resort on Monday, with Son at his side, along with Howard Lutnick, head of investment bank Cantor Fitzgerald and Trump's pick for commerce secretary.

"He's doing this because he feels very optimistic about our country," Trump said. The president-elect said that since his election, people have expressed interest in "coming in with tremendous amounts of money."

The investments by SoftBank, Trump said, are "a monumental demonstration of confidence in America's future."

Son said he wanted to "celebrate the great victory of President Trump" and that he will "bring the world into peace again."

"I am truly excited to make this happen," he said.

After the president-elect noted the \$100 billion was double an investment pledge Son made in 2016 on the eve of Trump's first administration, the technology mogul said he was doubling down. Trump, appearing to joke, asked him at the microphone if he would double the investment again: "Would you make it \$200 billion?"

Trump has in the past announced deals with companies overseas with much fanfare, though some companies in the end failed to deliver on those promised investments.

Foxconn Technology Group, a Taiwanese company best known for producing Apple iPhones, won Trump's praise after announcing plans in 2017 to build a \$10 billion complex that would employ 13,000 people in a small town just south of Milwaukee. But Foxconn's investment has been scaled back to a fraction of that after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monday's announcement, however, is a win for Trump, who has used the weeks since the election to promote his policies, negotiate with foreign leaders and try to strike deals.

He had already threatened steep tariffs for Mexico and Canada, which prompted a visit from Canada's prime minister. In a post on his Truth Social site last week, Trump said anyone making a \$1 billion investment in the United States "will receive fully expedited approvals and permits, including, but in no way limited to, all Environmental approvals." and a call with Mexico's president.

SoftBank was founded in 1981 by Son, a brash entrepreneur who studied at the University of California, Berkeley. SoftBank makes investments in a variety of companies that it groups together through its capital venture fund.

The company's investment portfolio includes search engine Yahoo, Chinese retailer Alibaba, and artificial intelligence company Nvidia. Earlier this year, it joined a partnership with Saudi Arabia to build a robot factory in Riyadh.

After Trump won the White House the first time in 2016, he met with Son before taking office. Son then announced plans to create 50,000 jobs and invest \$50 billion in U.S. startups, which Trump celebrated on social media, saying it never would have happened if he hadn't won the election.

Not all investments have panned out. The most notorious was SoftBank's massive stake in the office-sharing company WeWork which sought bankruptcy protection last year. It also invested in the failed robot pizza-making company Zume.

Monday's announcement comes days after Trump vowed to expedite federal permits for energy projects and other construction worth more than \$1 billion.

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No. 2 Auburn closes the gap on No. 1 Tennessee as the SEC holds 5 of top 7 spots in AP Top 25

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

Tennessee held onto No. 1 in the AP Top 25 for the second consecutive week, though No. 2 Auburn closed the gap as the top five remained unchanged in the men's college basketball poll Monday.

The Volunteers received 50 first-place votes from the national media panel after wins over Miami and Illinois pushed coach Rick Barnes' program to 10-0 for only the fifth time in school history. Auburn picked up nine first-place votes from last week and had 12 total. Iowa State, Duke and Kentucky rounded out the top five.

Tennessee is among five unbeaten teams left in men's Division I basketball and one of three from the Southeastern Conference, joining No. 7 Florida (10-0) and No. 14 Oklahoma (10-0). Drake (9-0) and Utah State (10-0) also enter this week undefeated.

"We know watching film there's a lot of areas we have to get better with, more consistent," Barnes said Monday. "It's everybody. Coaches getting better, players getting better. When you're in December, you have to be real. Look at film and realize we've done this or that, but we have a long way to go to be where we want to be."

Auburn improved to 9-1 with its 91-53 blowout of Ohio State in Atlanta. Johni Broome showed the way with 21 points and 20 rebounds for the Tigers' first 20-20 game in 35 years, then he raced back to Auburn for his graduation Saturday night.

"They may be the best team in the country right now," Ohio State coach Jake Diebler said. "They have a lot of experience, and they made us pay when we made a mistake."

The SEC continued to dominate the Top 25 with the Vols and Tigers joined by Kentucky, No. 6 Alabama and No. 7 Florida in giving the league five of the top seven. Kansas moved up two spots to No. 8 while Marquette and Oregon rounded out the top 10.

Two-time defending national champion UConn jumped seven spots to No. 11 after beating then-No. 8 Gonzaga. The Huskies were followed by Texas A&M, the Bulldogs, the Sooners and Houston, which remained at No. 15.

Purdue dropped five spots to No. 16 after its loss to the Aggies, and was followed by Ole Miss, UCLA, Cincinnati and Michigan State. Dayton entered the poll for the first time this season at No. 22, just behind Memphis, which returned after its win over Clemson. Wisconsin dropped out after its loss to Illinois while Mississippi State fell out after a narrow win over McNeese State.

San Diego State, Michigan and Clemson round out the Top 25.

Mid-major monitoring

Drake appeared on 11 ballots after an easy win over St. Ambrose kept first-year coach Ben McCollum's club unbeaten. Utah State showed up on 10 ballots after blowing out South Florida to give the Aggies their best start in school history.

"I've said all along, this is a place you can win at a high level consistently, and we've shown that, right? Year after year," Utah State coach Jarrod Calhoun said. "We never talk about making history. It was never talked about all week. ... It's about getting better each day. It's about enjoying the process."

Rising and falling

UConn made the biggest jump this week, climbing seven spots to No. 11 after beating Gonzaga. UCLA climbed six spots to No. 18 after beating Arizona for its eighth straight win, while Texas A&M moved up five spots to No. 12.

Michigan plummeted 10 places to No. 24 after blowing its halftime lead in an 89-87 loss to Arkansas in the Jimmy V Classic at Madison Square Garden. Clemson fell nine spots to No. 25 while Gonzaga and Purdue each dropped five spots.

In and out

Memphis spent a week at No. 16 earlier this year before a loss to Arkansas State. They returned while Dayton made its season debut at the expense of Wisconsin and Mississippi State, which received the most

votes of those outside the Top 25.

Conference watch

The SEC has eight teams in the Top 25 along with the first three outside the poll in Mississippi State, Arkansas and Missouri. The Big Ten has five, the Big 12 has four, and the ACC and Big East two apiece. Nine leagues had a ranked team.

Notre Dame jumps to 3rd in AP Top 25 women's poll after win over UConn; UCLA, South Carolina 1-2

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

Notre Dame jumped to No. 3 in The Associated Press Top 25 on Monday after beating rival UConn last week.

The Irish climbed five spots after the 79-68 victory over the Huskies, who fell two places to fourth. Notre Dame's victory over UConn gave the Irish three wins over top five teams this season. They also beat USC and Texas.

"This is a major win for us," Notre Dame coach Niele Ivey said. "Obviously, it's just one win, but I'm really grateful for this group and really proud of our effort and the way that we showed up today with such toughness and discipline."

UCLA remained the No. 1 team, receiving 30 of the 32 first-place votes from a national media panel. South Carolina was second and received a first-place vote, as did Notre Dame.

LSU was fifth with Texas, USC and Maryland following the Tigers. Duke and Oklahoma rounded out the top 10.

Unbeaten Yellow Jackets

Georgia Tech continues to move up the rankings as it remains unbeaten. The Yellow Jackets climbed eight spots to 17th after an 82-76 victory at then-No. 14 North Carolina on Sunday. It was their first win at the Tar Heels since 2012. Georgia Tech at 11-0 is off to the best start in school history.

Rising Bears

Cal entered the poll for the first time since 2019, coming in at No. 24. The Bears are 12-1 with the lone loss coming against No. 15 Michigan State. Cal beat rival Stanford by 20 points last Friday, snapping a 12-game losing streak in the series. The 20-point win was the third largest in the series history and the most since a win during the 1981-82 season.

Moving out

Iowa State fell out of the rankings after losing to rival Iowa last week. Things don't get easier for the Cyclones (9-3) with a trip to Connecticut to face the Huskies in the Basketball Hall of Fame Women's Showcase on Tuesday night.

Conference breakdown

The Big Ten has eight teams in the poll again this week. The Southeastern Conference has seven and the ACC six. The Big 12 has three and the Big East one.

Game of the week

No. 7 USC at No. 4 UConn, Saturday. Two of the top stars in college basketball will square off when JuJu Watkins and the Trojans head east to face Paige Bueckers and the Huskies. Watkins is third in the country in scoring at 24.6 points a game.

How old are Saturn's rings? Study suggests they could be 4.5 billion years old just like the planet

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — New research suggests that Saturn's rings may be older than they look — possibly as old as the planet.

Instead of being a youthful 400 million years old as commonly thought, the icy, shimmering rings could

be around 4.5 billion years old just like Saturn, a Japanese-led team reported Monday.

The scientists surmise Saturn's rings may be pristine not because they are young but because they are dirt-resistant.

Saturn's rings are long thought to be between 100 million and 400 million years old based on more than a decade of observations by NASA's Cassini spacecraft before its demise in 2017.

Images by Cassini showed no evidence of any darkening of the rings by impacting micrometeoroids — space rock particles smaller than a grain of sand — prompting scientists to conclude the rings formed long after the planet.

Through computer modeling, the Institute of Science Tokyo's Ryuki Hyodo and his team demonstrated that micrometeoroids vaporize once slamming into the rings, with little if any dark and dirty residue left behind. They found that the resulting charged particles get sucked toward Saturn or out into space, keeping the rings spotless and challenging the baby rings theory. Their results appear in the journal *Nature Geoscience*.

Hyodo said it's possible Saturn's rings could be somewhere between the two extreme ages — around the halfway mark of 2.25 billion years old. But the solar system was much more chaotic during its formative years with large planetary-type objects migrating and interacting all over the place, just the sort of scenario that would be conducive to producing Saturn's rings.

"Considering the solar system's evolutionary history, it's more likely that the rings formed closer to" Saturn's earliest times, he said in an email.

Prince Andrew's Chinese spy drama again pushes King Charles III to rein in scandal-prone brother

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — How do you solve a problem like Prince Andrew?

That's the question facing King Charles III as the drama surrounding his 64-year-old brother roils Britain and the monarchy once again.

In the latest episode, a Chinese businessman has been barred from the U.K. because of concerns he cultivated links with Andrew in an alleged effort to influence British elites on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party. The man, identified Monday as Yang Tengbo, said he wasn't involved in espionage and had "done nothing wrong or unlawful."

The allegations represent the most high-profile example to date of a threat intelligence officials have repeatedly warned about: China's increasing efforts to secretly influence politicians and other members of the British establishment to support the country's expansionist policies.

But the story also made news because it involves Andrew, once second-in-line to the British throne but now a constant source of tabloid fodder because of his money woes and links to questionable characters, including the late American financier and convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

Queen Elizabeth II stripped Andrew of his royal duties and charity roles, but the unflattering headlines kept coming. More recently, Charles has tried to persuade his brother to cut his expenses by leaving the sprawling royal estate he occupies west of London and moving to a cottage inside the security perimeter of Windsor Castle. But Andrew remains ensconced at the 30-room Royal Lodge.

The king needs to take more aggressive action to keep Andrew out of the public eye, such as barring him from processions and other royal events, said Ed Owens, author of "After Elizabeth: Can the Monarchy Save Itself?"

While Andrew said in a statement that nothing sensitive was ever discussed and that he ceased contact with the Chinese businessman as soon as concerns were raised, his constant brushes with scandal tarnish the work of the royal family, Owens said.

"Andrew is toxic and he is very much damaged goods," he added. "He can only, through his behavior, further undermine the reputation of the monarchy. It's in the king's best interest, it's in the best interests of the future of the monarchy, for Andrew to take a step back."

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Scandal fuels anti-monarchy criticism

Britain's most prominent anti-monarchy group used the latest scandal to call for a parliamentary inquiry into alleged royal corruption.

"When a Chinese spy befriends a royal, they want access to the British state. We must know if the royals have given them what they want," said Graham Smith, leader of Republic, which seeks to replace the monarchy with an elected head of state.

Andrew has become a cautionary tale about the temptations and pitfalls of modern royalty.

When Andrew was born he was second in line to the throne, the proverbial spare who was there to step in if disaster struck the heir, his brother Charles. But after Charles married, Andrew's position dropped with every new child and grandchild. He now stands at eighth place in the royal pecking order.

The Epstein scandal costs Andrew his job

While other senior royals spend much of their time opening recreation centers and meeting community leaders on behalf of their more exalted relations, Andrew initially took on bigger tasks.

After 22 years in the Royal Navy, including combat operations as a helicopter pilot during the Falklands War, Andrew was named Britain's special representative for international trade and investment in 2001.

But he was forced to step down in 2011 amid growing concern about his friendship with Epstein, who had been sentenced to 18 months in prison after pleading guilty to soliciting a minor for prostitution.

Andrew had also been criticized for meeting with the son of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi and the son-in-law of ousted Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Even before that, some members of Parliament had raised concerns about the sale of Andrew's former home, Sunninghill Park, to a son-in-law of former Kazakh ruler Nursultan Nazarbayev in 2007. The buyer allegedly paid 15 million pounds (\$19 million) — 3 million pounds more than the asking price.

But Andrew's links to Epstein have been his biggest problem.

The disastrous BBC interview

Questions about the relationship resurfaced after Epstein was again arrested on sex trafficking charges in 2019. In an effort to silence criticism, Andrew gave a disastrous interview to the BBC's Newsnight program in which he tried to explain away his contacts with Epstein and failed to show empathy for victims.

Amid the backlash, Andrew announced on Nov. 20, 2019, that he was stepping away from royal duties "for the foreseeable future." In a statement, he called his association with Epstein "a major disruption to my family's work."

But that didn't end the scandal.

In August 2021, one of Epstein's victims sued Andrew in a New York court, alleging that the prince had sex with her when she was underage. Andrew denied the allegations, but he was stripped of all military affiliations and royal charity work as the case moved through the legal process.

Netflix film brings a global audience

Andrew ultimately settled the case for an undisclosed sum, with a joint statement indicating the prince would make a "substantial donation" to a victims' rights charity. British newspapers reported amounts for the settlement ranged from \$6 million to \$16 million.

Even now, Andrew's interview haunts the prince and the royal family. It resurfaced earlier this year in the Netflix movie "Scoop," reminding a worldwide audience of his missteps.

"He has consistently used his privileged position and his power to cozy up to convicted sex offenders, Chinese spies — in pursuit of his own interests, whether it's about expanding his own influence or indeed extending his own business interests," Owens said. "That's the problem here, that he's used the position given to him by birth to seek out these opportunities."

AP All-America team: Travis Hunter, Xavier Watts back on first team; Ashton Jeanty is unanimous pick

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Heisman Trophy winner Travis Hunter of Colorado was a first-team selection at two spots and a second-team pick at another on The Associated Press All-America team announced Monday.

Hunter and Notre Dame safety Xavier Watts were repeat first-team selections, and Boise State's Ashton Jeanty was the only unanimous pick after he posted one of the highest single-season rushing totals in college football history.

A total of 24 schools are represented on the first team, selected by a panel of AP Top 25 voters. Texas and Miami had two players apiece on the first team.

Hunter, named the AP player of the year last week, is regarded as one of the greatest two-way college athletes since football shifted away from such players in the 1940s. He was named first-team cornerback, first-team all-purpose player and second-team receiver.

The junior from Suwanee, Georgia, has totaled 1,443 snaps on offense, defense and special teams over 12 games, according to Pro Football Focus. He played at least 120 snaps in 10 games, including a season-high 170 against Texas Tech on Nov. 9. His snaps were limited in two other games because of injury.

Hunter, who announced last month he would enter the 2025 NFL draft, said he would play in Colorado's game against BYU in the Alamo Bowl on Dec. 28.

As a receiver, Hunter finished the regular season ranking among the national leaders with 92 catches for 1,152 yards and 14 touchdowns. His 21 catches that went 20-plus yards lead the country.

As a cornerback, he made 31 tackles and was among the national leaders with 11 pass breakups and four interceptions. His biggest defensive play came in the Buffaloes' overtime win over Baylor when his hard hit on Dominic Richardson near the goal line forced a fumble on the final play.

Notre Dame's Watts has five interceptions, tied for most among safeties, and he's responsible for six of the Irish's nation-leading 28 takeaways. Against Southern California, he became the first Notre Dame player to return an interception 100 yards. His 12 career picks are most by a Notre Dame player since 1996.

Boise State's Jeanty has run for 2,497 yards, the fourth-most ever in the Football Bowl Subdivision, and he went over 200 yards in six games. His 29 rushing touchdowns are tied for the national lead.

First-team All-Americans (by conference)

SEC — 6

ACC — 5

Big Ten — 5

Big 12 — 4

MAC — 3

Mountain West — 2

Sun Belt — 1

Independent — 1

First-team offense

Wide receivers — Nick Nash, San Jose State, senior, 6-3, 195, Irvine, California; Tetairoa McMillan, Arizona, junior, 6-5, 212, Waimanalo, Hawaii; Xavier Restrepo, Miami, senior, 5-10, 198, Coconut Creek, Florida.

Tackles — Kelvin Banks, Texas, junior, 6-3, 320, Humble, Texas; Will Campbell, LSU, junior, 6-6, 323, Monroe, Louisiana.

Guards — Addison West, Western Michigan, senior, 6-3, 305, Cary, Illinois; Willie Lampkin, North Carolina, senior, 5-11, 290, Lakeland, Florida.

Center — Jake Slaughter, Florida, junior, 6-5, 308, Sparr Florida.

Tight end — Harold Fannin Jr., Bowling Green, junior, 6-4, 230, Canton, Ohio.

Quarterback — Cam Ward, Miami, senior, 6-2, 223, West Columbia, Texas.

Running backs — u-Ashton Jeanty, Boise State, junior, 5-9, 215, Jacksonville, Florida; Cam Skattebo, Arizona State, senior, 5-11, 215, Rio Linda, California.

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Kicker — Kenneth Almendares, Louisiana-Lafayette, senior, 6-2, 252, Clute, Texas.

All-purpose — Travis Hunter, Colorado, junior, 6-1, 185, Suwanee, Georgia.

First-team defense

Edge rushers — Abdul Carter, Penn State, junior, 6-3, 252, Philadelphia; Donovan Ezeiruaku, Boston College, senior, 6-2, 247, Williamstown, New Jersey.

Interior linemen — Mason Graham, Michigan, junior, 6-3, 320, Mission Viejo, California; Walter Nolen, Mississippi, junior, 6-3, 305, Powell, Tennessee.

Linebackers — Jay Higgins, Iowa, senior, 6-2, 232, Indianapolis; Shaun Dolac, Buffalo, graduate, 6-1, 225, West Seneca, New York; Carson Schwesinger, UCLA, junior, 6-2, 225, Moorpark, California.

Cornerbacks — Jahdae Barron, Texas, senior, 5-11, 200, Austin, Texas; Travis Hunter, Colorado, junior, 6-1, 185, Suwanee, Georgia.

Safeties — Xavier Watts, Notre Dame, graduate, 6-0, 203, Omaha, Nebraska; Caleb Downs, Ohio State, sophomore, 6-0, 205, Hoschton, Georgia.

Defensive back — Nick Emmanwori, South Carolina, junior, 6-3, 227, Irmo, South Carolina.

Punter — Alex Mastromanno, Florida State, senior, 6-1, 241, Melbourne, Australia.

Second-team offense

Wide receivers — Travis Hunter, Colorado, junior, 6-1, 185, Suwanee, Georgia; Tre Harris, Mississippi, senior, 6-3, 210, Lafayette, Louisiana; Jeremiah Smith, Ohio State, freshman, 6-3, 215, Miami Gardens, Florida.

Tackles — Spencer Fano, Utah, sophomore, 6-5, 304, Spanish Fork, Utah; Wyatt Milum, West Virginia, senior, 6-6, 317, Kenova, West Virginia.

Guards — Tyler Booker, Alabama, junior, 6-5, 325, New Haven, Connecticut; Donovan Jackson, Ohio State, senior, 6-4, 320, Cypress, Texas, and Dylan Fairchild, Georgia, junior, 6-5, 315, Cumming, Georgia.

Center — Seth McLaughlin, Ohio State, graduate, 6-4, 305, Buford, Georgia.

Tight end — Tyler Warren, Penn State, senior, 6-6, 261, Mechanicsville, Virginia.

Quarterback — Shedeur Sanders, Colorado, senior, 6-2, 215, Dallas.

Running backs — Omarion Hampton, North Carolina, junior, 6-0, 220, Clayton, North Carolina; Kaleb Johnson, Iowa, junior, 6-0, 225, Hamilton, Ohio.

Kicker — Dominic Zvada, Michigan, junior 6-3, 180, Chandler, Arizona, and Alex Raynor, Kentucky, senior, 6-0, 185, Kennesaw, Georgia.

All-purpose — Desmond Reid, Pittsburgh, junior, 5-8, 175, Miami Gardens, Florida.

Second-team defense

Edge rushers — Kyle Kennard, South Carolina, senior, 6-5, 254, Atlanta; Mike Green, Marshall, sophomore, 6-4, 238, Williamsburg, Virginia.

Interior linemen — Derrick Harmon, Oregon, junior, 6-5, 310, Detroit; Alfred Collins, Texas, senior, 6-5, 320, Bastrop, Texas.

Linebackers — Anthony Hill Jr., Texas, sophomore, 6-3, 235, Denton, Texas; Danny Stutsman, Oklahoma, senior, 6-4, 243, Windermere, Florida; Kyle Louis, Pittsburgh, sophomore, 6-0, 225, East Orange, New Jersey.

Cornerbacks — Nohl Williams, California, senior, 6-1, 200, Oxnard, California; Jermod McCoy, Tennessee, sophomore, 6-0, 193, Whitehouse, Texas.

Safeties — Malaki Starks, Georgia, junior, 6-1, 205, Jefferson, Georgia; Malachi Moore, Alabama, graduate, 6-0, 201, Trussville, Alabama.

Defensive back — Michael Taaffe, Texas, junior, 6-0, 195, Austin, Texas.

Punter — Brett Thorson, Georgia, junior, 6-2, 235, Melbourne, Australia.

Third-team offense

Wide receivers — Tai Felton, Maryland, senior, 6-2, 186, Ashburn, Virginia; Jayden Higgins, Iowa State, senior, 6-4, 215, South Miami, Florida; Jordyn Tyson, Arizona State, sophomore, 6-1, 195, Allen, Texas and Eric Rivers, Florida International, senior, 5-11, 174, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Tackles — Josh Conerly Jr., Oregon, junior, 6-4, 315, Seattle; Aireontae Ersery, Minnesota, senior, 6-3, 330, Kansas City, Missouri.

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Guards — Tate Ratledge, Georgia, senior, 6-6, 330, Rome, Georgia; Paolo Gennarelli, Army, sophomore, 6-1, 310, Campton Hills, Illinois.

Center — Jacob Gardner, Colorado State, graduate, 6-4, 300, Rancho Cucamonga, California.

Tight end — Oronde Gadsden II, Syracuse, junior, 6-5, 236, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Quarterback — Dillon Gabriel, Oregon, graduate, 6-0, 200, Mililani, Hawaii.

Running backs — Dylan Sampson, Tennessee; junior, 5-11, 201, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; RJ Harvey, UCF, senior, 5-9, 208, Orlando, Florida.

Kicker — Ryan Fitzgerald, Florida State., senior, 6-1, 190, Coolidge, Georgia.

All-purpose — Brashard Smith, SMU, 5-10, 196, senior, Richmond Heights, Florida.

Third-team defense

Edge rushers — Antwaun Powell-Ryland, Virginia Tech, senior, 6-3, 252, Portsmouth, Virginia; Mikail Kamara, Indiana, junior, 6-1, 265, Ashburn, Virginia.

Interior linemen — Aeneas Peebles, Virginia Tech, graduate, 6-1, 290, Raleigh, North Carolina; Kenneth Grant, Michigan, junior, 6-3, 339, Gary, Indiana.

Linebackers — Chris Paul Jr., Mississippi, junior, 6-1, 235, Cordele, Georgia; Barrett Carter, Clemson, senior, 6-1, 230, Suwanee, Georgia; Jalon Walker, Georgia, junior, 6-2, 245, Salisbury, North Carolina.

Cornerbacks — Chandler Rivers, Duke, junior, 5-10, 180, Beaumont, Texas; Will Johnson, Michigan, junior, 6-2, 202, Detroit.

Safeties — Lathan Ransom, Ohio State, graduate, 6-1, 210, Tucson, Arizona; Jalen Catalon, UNLV, senior, 5-11, 205, Mansfield, Texas.

Defensive back — Mello Dotson, Kansas, senior, 6-1, 190, Daytona Beach, Florida.

Punter — Eddie Czaplicki, Southern California, senior, 6-1, 207, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Schools are cutting bus service for children. Parents are turning to ride-hailing apps

By JEFF McMURRAY Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Ismael El-Amin was driving his daughter to school when a chance encounter gave him an idea for a new way to carpool.

On the way across Chicago, El-Amin's daughter spotted a classmate riding with her own dad as they drove to their selective public school on the city's North Side. For 40 minutes, they rode along the same congested highway.

"They're waving to each other in the back. I'm looking at the dad. The dad's looking at me. And I was like, parents can definitely be a resource to parents," said El-Amin, who went on to found Piggyback Network, a service parents can use to book rides for their children.

Reliance on school buses has been waning for years as districts struggle to find drivers and more students attend schools far outside their neighborhoods. As responsibility for transportation shifts to families, the question of how to replace the traditional yellow bus has become an urgent problem for some, and a spark for innovation.

State and local governments decide how widely to offer school bus service. Lately, more have been cutting back. Only about 28% of U.S. students take a school bus, according to a Federal Highway Administration survey concluded early last year. That's down from about 36% in 2017.

Chicago Public Schools, the nation's fourth-largest district, has significantly curbed bus service in recent years. It still offers rides for disabled and homeless students, in line with a federal mandate, but most families are on their own. Only 17,000 of the district's 325,000 students are eligible for school bus rides.

Last week, the school system launched a pilot program allowing some students who attend out-of-neighborhood magnet or selective-enrollment schools to catch a bus at a nearby school's "hub stop." It aims to start with rides for about 1,000 students by the end of the school year.

It's not enough to make up for the lost service, said Erin Rose Schubert, a volunteer for the CPS Parents for Buses advocacy group.

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"The people who had the money and the privilege were able to figure out other situations like rearranging their work schedules or public transportation," she said. "People who didn't, some had to pull their kids out of school."

On Piggyback Network, parents can book a ride for their student online with another parent traveling the same direction. Rides cost roughly 80 cents per mile and the drivers are compensated with credits to use for their own kids' rides.

"It's an opportunity for kids to not be late to school," 15-year-old Takia Phillips said on a recent PiggyBack ride with El-Amin as the driver.

The company has arranged a few hundred rides in its first year operating in Chicago, and El-Amin has been contacting drivers for possible expansion to Virginia, North Carolina and Texas. It is one of several startups that have been filling the void.

Unlike Piggyback Network, which connects parents, HopSkipDrive contracts directly with school districts to assist students without reliable transportation. The company launched a decade ago in Los Angeles with three mothers trying to coordinate school carpools and now supports some 600 school districts in 13 states.

Regulations keep it from operating in some states, including Kentucky, where a group of Louisville students has been lobbying on its behalf to change that.

After the district halted bus service to most traditional and magnet schools, the student group known as The Real Young Prodigys wrote a hip-hop song titled "Where My Bus At?" The song's music video went viral on YouTube with lyrics such as, "I'm a good kid. I stay in class, too. Teachers want me to succeed, but I can't get to school."

"Those bus driver shortages are not really going away," HopSkipDrive CEO Joanna McFarland said. "This is a structural change in the industry we need to get serious about addressing."

HopSkipDrive has been a welcome option for Reinya Gibson's son, Jerren Samuel, who attends a small high school in Oakland, California. She said the school takes care to accommodate his needs as a student with autism, but the district lined up the transportation because there is no bus from their home in San Leandro.

"Growing up, people used to talk about kids in the short yellow buses. They were associated with a physical disability, and they were teased or made fun of," Gibson said. "Nobody knows this is support for Jerren because he can't take public transportation."

Encouragement from his mother helped Jerren overcome his fear about riding with a stranger to school. "I felt really independent getting in that car," he said.

Companies catering to kids claim to screen drivers more extensively, checking their fingerprints and requiring them to have childcare or parenting experience. Drivers and children are often given passwords that must match, and parents can track a child's whereabouts in real time through the apps.

Kango, a competitor to HopSkipDrive in California and Arizona, started as a free carpooling app similar to the PiggyBack Network and now contracts with school districts. Drivers are paid more than they would typically get for Uber or Lyft, but there are often more requirements such as walking some students with disabilities into school, Kango CEO Sara Schaer said.

"This is not just a curbside-to-curbside, three-minute situation," Schaer said. "You are responsible for getting that kid to and from school. That's not the same as transporting an adult or DoorDashing somebody's lunch or dinner."

In Chicago, some families that have used Piggyback said they have seen few alternatives.

Concerned about the city's rising crime rate, retired police officer Sabrina Beck never considered letting her son take the subway to Whitney Young High School. Since she was driving him anyway, she volunteered through PiggyBack also to drive a freshman who had qualified for the selective magnet school but had no way to get there.

"To have the opportunity to go and then to miss it because you don't have the transportation, that is so detrimental," Beck said. "Options like this are extremely important."

After the bus route that took her two kids to elementary school was canceled, Jazmine Dillard and other

Chicago parents thought they had convinced the school to move up the opening bell from 8:45 a.m. to 8:15 a.m., a more manageable time for her schedule. After that plan was scrapped because the buses were needed elsewhere at that time, Dillard turned to PiggyBack Network.

"We had to kind of pivot and find a way to make it to work on time as well as get them to school on time," she said.

As Trump threatens mass deportations, Central America braces for an influx of vulnerable migrants

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras (AP) — As dozens of deported migrants pack into a sweltering airport facility in San Pedro Sula, Norma sits under fluorescent lights clutching a foam cup of coffee and a small plate of eggs — all that was waiting for her in Honduras.

The 69-year-old Honduran mother had never imagined leaving her Central American country. But then came the anonymous death threats to her and her children and the armed men who showed up at her doorstep threatening to kill her, just like they had killed one of her relatives days earlier.

Norma, who requested anonymity out of concern for her safety, spent her life savings of \$10,000 on a one-way trip north at the end of October with her daughter and granddaughter.

But after her asylum petitions to the U.S. were rejected, they were loaded onto a deportation flight. Now, she's back in Honduras within reach of the same gang, stuck in a cycle of violence and economic precarity that haunts deportees like her.

"They can find us in every corner of Honduras," she said in the migrant processing facility. "We're praying for God's protection, because we don't expect anything from the government."

Now, as U.S. President-elect Donald Trump is set to take office in January with a promise of carrying out mass deportations, Honduras and other Central American countries people have fled for generations are bracing for a potential influx of vulnerable migrants — a situation they are ill-prepared to handle.

'We don't have the capacity'

Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, which have the largest number of people living illegally in the U.S., after Mexico, could be among the first and most heavily impacted by mass deportations, said Jason Houser, former Immigration & Customs Enforcement chief of staff in the Biden administration.

Because countries like Venezuela refuse to accept deportation flights from the U.S., Houser suggests that the Trump administration may prioritize the deportation of "the most vulnerable" migrants from those countries who have removal orders but no criminal record, in an effort to rapidly increase deportation numbers.

"Hondurans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans need to be very, very nervous because (Trump officials) are going to press the bounds of the law," said Houser.

Migrants and networks aiding deportees in those Northern Triangle countries worry their return could thrust them into even deeper economic and humanitarian crises, fueling migration down the line.

"We don't have the capacity" to take so many people, said Antonio García, Honduras' deputy foreign minister. "There's very little here for deportees." People who return, he said, "are the last to be taken care of."

Making their way back to the US

Since 2015, Honduras has received around half a million deportees. They climb down from planes and buses to be greeted with coffee, small plates of food and bags of toothpaste and deodorant. While some breathe a sigh of relief, free from harsh conditions in U.S. detention facilities, others cry, gripped with panic.

"We don't know what we'll do, what comes next," said one woman in a cluster of deportees waiting for their names to be called by a man clacking at a keyboard.

Approximately 560,000 Hondurans, about 5% of the country's population, live in the U.S. without legal status, according to U.S. government figures. Of those, migration experts estimate about 150,000 can be tracked down and rapidly expelled.

While García said the government offers services to help returnees, most are released with little aid into

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a country gripped by gangs. They have few options for work to pay off crippling debts. Others like Norma have nowhere to go, unable to return home because of the gang members circling her home.

Norma said she's unsure of why they were targeted, but she believes it was because the relative who was killed had problems with a gang.

Despite the crackdown, García estimates up to 40% of Honduran deportees make their way back to the U.S.

A looming humanitarian crisis

Larissa Martínez, 31, is among those who have struggled to reintegrate into Honduran society after being deported from the U.S. in 2021 with her three children. Driven by economic desperation and the absence of her husband, who had migrated and left her for another woman, the single mother sought a better life in the U.S.

Since her return to Honduras, Martínez has spent the past three years searching for a job, not just to support her kids, but also to pay off the \$5,000 she owes to relatives for the trip north.

Her efforts have been unsuccessful. She built a wobbly wooden home tucked away in the hilly fringes of San Pedro Sula, where she sells meat and cheese to get by, but sales have been slim and tropical rains have eaten away at the flimsy walls where they sleep.

So she's begun to repeat a chant in her head: "If I don't find work in December, I'll leave in January."

César Muñoz, a leader at Mennonite Social Action Commission, said Honduran authorities have abandoned deportees like Martínez, leaving organizations like his to step in. But with three deportation flights arriving weekly, aid networks are already stretched thin.

A significant uptick could leave aid networks, migrants and their families reeling. Meanwhile, countries like Honduras, heavily reliant on remittances from the U.S., could face severe economic consequences as this vital lifeline is cut.

"We're at the brink of a new humanitarian crisis," Muñoz said.

Trump's return has been met with a range of reactions by Latin American nations connected to the U.S. through migration and trade.

Guatemala, a country with more than 750,000 citizens living unauthorized in the U.S., announced in November it was working on a strategy to take on potential mass deportations. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Mexico is already beefing up legal services in its U.S. consulates and that she would ask Trump to deport non-Mexicans directly to their countries of origin.

Honduras' Deputy Foreign Minister García expressed skepticism about Trump's threat, citing the economic benefits immigrants provide to the U.S. economy and the logistical challenges of mass deportations. Aid leaders like Muñoz say Honduras isn't sufficiently preparing for a potential surge in deportations.

Even with a crackdown by Trump it would be "impossible" to stop people from migrating, García said. Driven by poverty, violence and the hope for a better life, clusters of deportees climb aboard buses on their way back to the U.S.

As deportations by both U.S. and Mexican authorities spike, smugglers are offering migrants packages in which they get three tries to make it north. If migrants get captured on their journey and sent back home, they still have two chances to get to the U.S.

Freshly returned to Honduras, 26-year-old Kimberly Orellana said she spent three months detained in a Texas facility before being sent back to San Pedro Sula, where she waited in a bus station for her mother to pick her up.

Yet, she was already planning to return, saying she had no choice: her 4-year-old daughter Marcelle was waiting for her, cared for by a friend in North Carolina.

The two were separated by smugglers crossing the Rio Grande, in hopes to increase their chances of successfully crossing over. Orellana vowed to her daughter that they would be reunited.

"Mami, are you sure you're coming?" Marcelle asks her over the phone.

"Now, being here it's difficult to know if I'll ever be able to follow through with that promise," Orellana said, clinging to her Honduran passport. "I have to try again. ... My daughter is all I have."

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Today in History: December 17, the Wright Brothers' first flight

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 17, the 352nd day of 2024. There are 14 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 17, 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright of Dayton, Ohio, conducted the first successful manned, powered airplane flights near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, using their experimental craft, the Wright Flyer.

Also on this date:

In 1933, in the inaugural NFL championship football game, the Chicago Bears defeated the New York Giants, 23-21, at Wrigley Field.

In 1944, the U.S. Army's Western Defense Command rescinded orders to incarcerate people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast during World War II; more than 110,000 men, woman and children of Japanese ancestry, about two-thirds of whom were American citizens, had been forced into camps and held by armed guards following a February 1942 executive order by President Franklin Roosevelt.

In 1975, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme was sentenced in Sacramento, California, to life in prison for her attempt on the life of President Gerald R. Ford. (She was paroled in August 2009.)

In 1979, Arthur McDuffie, a Black insurance broker and former Marine, was beaten by police after leading them on a chase with his motorcycle in Miami. McDuffie died in a hospital four days later. (Four white police officers accused of beating McDuffie were acquitted the following year, sparking riots in the city that led to several deaths and millions of dollars in damages.)

In 1989, the animated television show 'The Simpsons' made its debut.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in separate ceremonies.

In 2014, the United States and communist Cuba restored diplomatic relations after decades of mutual animosity, sweeping away one of the last vestiges of the Cold War.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Armin Mueller-Stahl is 94. Pope Francis is 88. Actor Ernie Hudson is 79. Political commentator Chris Matthews is 79. Comedian-actor Eugene Levy is 78. Actor Wes Studi is 77. Rock singer Paul Rodgers is 75. Actor Bill Pullman is 71. Filmmaker Peter Farrelly is 68. Rock musician Mike Mills (R.E.M.) is 66. Country singer Tracy Byrd is 58. Actor Laurie Holden is 55. Actor Claire Forlani is 53. Filmmaker Rian Johnson is 51. Actor Sarah Paulson is 50. Actor Giovanni Ribisi is 50. Actor Milla Jovovich (YO'-vuh-vich) is 49. Boxer Manny Pacquiao is 46. Actor-singer Nat Wolff is 30.